

PRIMITIVE WAR



ETHAN PETTUS

"Wow," Leon said. "Sounds like badass, top secret stuff."

"Yeah, if you think shady politics and unauthorized warfare is badass," Ryan muttered.

They walked up to the cabin and Bishop directed them inside. The interior of the cabin was surprisingly homey; there was a cheap carpeted floor with a mahogany desk covered in files pushed against the back wall. The only light in the room came from a dim lamp on top of the desk.

General Jericho leaned against the desk and puffed on a thick cigar. A black man dressed in the SOG fatigues, Ibex, was seated across from him. He studied Vulture Squad and chuffed a laugh.

"Vulture Squad, alive in the flesh," Ibex said in a thick Afrikaans accent. "I never thought I'd see the day."

General Jericho stood from his desk and Ryan said, "Attention!"

Vulture Squad snapped into a rigid salute. General Jericho stepped around his desk and examined them closely, looking them up and down. He was dressed in olive drab fatigues with a General's black beret. His face was heavily worn with stress, and his eyes were piercing and cold. He kept his hands clasped behind his back as he walked up and down the line.

Jericho had the stooped gait of a Condor and a hooked nose to match. His grey goatee was carefully maintained, and his uniform was starched and spotless. It was obvious he had remained untouched by the wilderness surrounding the base.

Jericho stopped in front of Eli and stared menacingly into his eyes. Eli stared straight ahead through Jericho, unblinking.

"I read your file," Jericho said in a rumbling baritone. "You look like even more of a degenerate in person. Let me hear that hick twang of yours; I could use a laugh."

Eli cleared his throat. "Sir, I ain't got no twang, sir."

"I bet you buy moonshine from your mother, you sorry sack of shit," Jericho grunted. He looked at Ryan. "This is the team you assembled? This is the infamous Vulture Squad? It looks like a bunch of rejects to me."

"Sir, they're the best men I could have asked for, sir," Ryan said.

Jericho shook his head. "No, Baker, they aren't. McNeil's

squad was perfect. The only mistake he ever made as a captain was letting you onto the team.”

Ryan clenched his fists. “Sir, I’m only here to follow orders, sir.”

Jericho nodded. “Right. At ease, Vultures,” he said.

The squad relaxed. Jericho turned his back on them and walked to a wall covered in maps and aerial photos.

Ryan squinted at a photo that he recognized as the valley. There were four small grey squares along the river that bisected the basin. A line had been drawn from the bottom of the valley, where Jericho’s base was located, leading north. The line went from Jericho’s base to each grey square, towards the top of the valley, where a question-mark had been drawn.

“You’re probably wondering why I’ve brought you here,” Jericho said. “My MACV-SOG team has been tracking Viet Cong supply shipments out of this valley for some time now. I recently sent a platoon of Green Beret to back-track the source of these shipments and to investigate the fortifications you see here,” he gestured to the map.

“We lost all communication with these men a week ago. I’m afraid that they might be lost, or even worse, captured by Viet Cong. These were some of the best Green Beret that I could have enlisted, and the fact that they’ve vanished without a shred of evidence is deeply unsettling.

“The only thing that I require from Vulture Squad is that you follow the Green Berets’ trail and find out what happened to them. Once you locate the Green Beret, you will be air-lifted out, and sent back south of the DMZ to continue your work.”

“Sir,” Leon said, “What were the Viet Cong shipments, sir?”

Without looking back, Jericho said, “Classified.”

Leon and Xavier looked at each other. Logan shook his head.

“Sir, why are you in this valley, sir?” Gerald asked.

“Classified,” Jericho repeated, louder.

Ryan saw Eli open his mouth, so he quickly interjected. “Sir, where would you like us to begin searching, sir?”

Jericho pointed at the grey squares on the map. “We believe that these may be Viet Cong settlements. Bomb shelters, or bunkers,

possibly. If the Green Beret have been captured, they will most likely be at one of these locations. I'll be giving you a map with the coordinates of each of these buildings. You will investigate each one, look for the platoon, and report back on your findings."

"Sir, why would the Viet Cong have concrete shelters?" Gerald asked. "Isn't that a little sophisticated for them? Are you sure they aren't NVA bunkers, sir?"

"Sir, what were the Green Beret looking for, sir?" Leon asked.

Jericho ground his teeth audibly. Miller winced.

"Classified, classified, and if anybody asks another question, I'll have Bishop and Ibex take turns making you wish you had never opened your mouth in my office!" Jericho rumbled. "Are we understood? You are on a need-to-know basis, and all you need to know is that you have to find these missing Green Beret and bring them home. I swear to god, the next insubordinate that opens his mouth is going to be detained."

There was silence. Jericho glared, daring somebody to speak.

Eli opened his mouth, and Miller elbowed him in the ribs.

"Are we understood?" Jericho repeated.

"Sir, yes, sir," the men of Vulture Squad said.

"Good. You will be leaving at 2100 hours. If you have any more questions, please find Shadow so he can beat some sense into you." Jericho spat on the floor.

"Dismissed."

The squad quickly filed out into the storm, but when Ryan reached the open doorway, Jericho grabbed him by the arm and spun him around.

"Try not to lose this squad, Baker," Jericho growled, "It'd be a shame to fail McNeil twice."

Ryan stared at Jericho and clenched his jaw tight. His hands balled into tight, shaking fists and he swallowed dryly. "I don't intend to, sir."

Jericho narrowed his eyes. He shoved Ryan out and slammed the door in his face. As Ryan turned and walked towards the barracks, he couldn't shake the distinct feeling that Jericho didn't care about the Green Beret team. He knew that Jericho was after something much more than that.

CHAPTER FIVE– ANIMALS

The storm pummeled General Jericho's base. The members of Vulture Squad were scattered around the various buildings while waiting for the thunder to subside. Leon, the young rookie, was standing beneath the awning of one of the cabins with Xavier.

Xavier leaned back in a metal folding chair and put his feet on the rotting two-by-four railing of the porch. He began sharpening his machete while staring out at the darkness of the jungle beyond. Leon leaned against the wall of the shack and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"What do you think you would have done if you hadn't enlisted?" Leon asked.

Xavier held the machete up to his eyes and studied the cutting edge of the blade. Frowning, he lowered it to his lap and continued to drag the wet-stone across it. It made a dull, rasping hiss.

"I don't know," Xavier answered slowly. "I suppose I would have been doing the same thing, but somewhere else. Living in the wilderness, hunting, being hunted. Same thing, different animals. Maybe bears instead of man, mountains instead of villages and POW camps."

"You think you'd always be doing something like this?" Leon asked. He leaned against the railing and looked across the camp. The Vietnamese boys were still training in the rain with the Black Ops team.

"I would," Xavier mumbled. The machete hissed. "I think I've always done this, one life or another. I might have been a big-game hunter in the 1800's, or I might have been the man that shot the lions of Tsavo. I don't know who I've been, but I know who I'll always be. I'll always be a hunter, always being hunted. I never would have guessed that humans would be my primary choice, but hey, so it goes."

Leon's eyes opened wider. He saw a young woman step out of the yellow light of the infirmary and jog through the rain to Jericho's office. She glanced at Leon as she passed, and Leon raised a single hand. He waved with a shy smile.

Leon could barely discern the girl's features through the darkness and rain, but he sensed that she was smiling back. He saw her give a brief wave before stepping inside of Jericho's cabin. Leon continued to stare even after the door was shut. A smile was fixed to his lips.

"You're young, Leon," Xavier said. "You can be whatever you want to be. You could be back home, with girls like that or in school studying. Hell, you could grow your hair out long like me and get down with the hippie girls on Haight-Ashbury. Why are you here? What else would you be, other than a Vulture?"

Leon didn't take his eyes off of the door. He thought he could hear the girl laughing through the rain.

"I don't know," Leon said. "Maybe I was always meant to be here." "You say that," Xavier said. "But do you think you're meant to die here?"

Leon frowned, but didn't speak. He listened to the rain drumming against the sheet-metal awning. Xavier chuckled, but Leon could sense that it was a hollow laugh.

"You're a child, Leon," Xavier said. "You don't know who or what you are yet. You don't know what your life is, or will be, or what it can become. You don't know what this war will do to you.

"You can keep asking us what it's like, but you'll never know until you cross that line. You don't want to know who you'll be on the other side."

"Maybe I'll be a man," Leon said, shrugging. "Maybe I'll be stronger."

"A child," Xavier chuckled, shaking his head. "You think this will make you into a man? Maybe. Maybe you'll become less of a man. Maybe you'll find out you were more of an animal to begin with. Only one way to find out, though, right?"

"Right," Leon said.

"Leon, do you know why I'm sharpening this machete?"

"So it can cut cleaner?"

"So it doesn't get stuck," Xavier said. "I don't like to hear an animal suffering."

Leon remained silent. Xavier elbowed him in the side.

"It's a joke," Xavier said. "This is all a joke. Lighten up."

They listened to the rain.

Ryan stared at his reflection in the mirror. He was standing in a rudimentary outhouse connected to the barracks that the rest of Vulture Squad was staying in. The rain tapped across the tin roof like the limbs of heavy crawling insects. The sound filled the void of the wooden coffin. A flickering fluorescent bulb above the mirror provided the room with scant blue light. Ryan leaned against the

wash-basin sink and looked into the reflection of his eyes.

Ryan found something reprehensible about his soft green eyes. They seemed malleable to him; weak and vulnerable. His irises were like mangrove roots creeping through shallow pools of emerald water. The veins snaking through his corneas were vibrant red and burning. The eyelids twitched nearly imperceptibly. If the eyes were the window to the soul, then Ryan wished he could reach through those sparkling waters to drag his spirit out and smother it. Ryan slowly peeled the woolen mask from his face, maintaining eye contact as he did so. His heartbeat raced. Once the mask was off, he felt a cold chasm open in his gut. His facial expression suggested no life beneath the skin.

Cavernous scars were gouged through his fragmented cheekbones, and his lips were split into the segments of a millipede. His nose was crumpled and pitted, and his cheeks were scarred as if by a tiger's claws.

The skin on Ryan's face that had remained seamless and intact was burned and scarred to a fleshy pearly. The sockets of his eyes were dark and deep. A tear fell into the basin. Ryan choked and touched his forehead to the mirror. He pulled up his shirt sleeve and dragged a finger along a row of track marks leading to his inner elbow. There was a blister of scar tissue in the crook of his arm.

Ryan mimicked pushing the needle of a syrette through the blister, and he sighed. He panted through his mangled teeth. He tapped his forehead against the mirror and squeezed his elbow. His breathing became rushed; panicked. His fingers trembled. Ryan experienced vivid memories of fire, of mortar rounds demolishing the side of a mountain. He was lost in a storm of burning debris, tossed like a ragdoll by the concussive detonations. He could still hear the screams of his friends from years ago. It was hell on earth. The immense bodies of ancient trees had fallen around him like the immolated pillars of a ruined civilization. The memories overpowered Ryan, flooding his mind with abject horror. With a scream, Ryan punched the mirror, shattering it. The broken glass slashed open his knuckles and blood splattered into the wash-basin. Ryan moaned and backed into the wall. He slid to the floor, plucking the glass from his hand absent-mindedly.

When Ryan was done, he wrapped his cuts with gauze and put a hand over his face to stifle a whimper. He looked through his

fingers and saw his reflection in a fragment of glass on the floor. He growled and kicked it away.

The storm filled his head.

The inside of the cabin was worn down and covered in mildew, but compared to the jungles Vulture Squad had been sleeping in, it was a warm and comforting semblance of home. Miller was stretched out on a bed, reading a bible in the soft yellow light of a lamp. His lips moved silently as he pronounced the words. He felt the crucifix of his rosary between his thumb and finger. He scratched his short crop of hair and yawned.

The door to the cabin opened wide, allowing the roar of the storm to disrupt the serenity. Eli bustled inside with a bottle of Jack Daniel's under his arm. He was snickering, grinning like a child. Miller didn't look up. "What have you got there?" he asked. "Oh, nothing," Eli said. He quickly filled his flask with the bourbon and tossed the bottle under his bunk. "Just getting an advance payment for my services."

"Helping those Green Beret should be payment enough," Miller said.

"Yeah, I mean, I'm all for saving these Green Beret, but you know Jericho doesn't give a shit about them," Eli said. "If he gave a shit about them, he wouldn't have been risking their lives while sitting in his office shootin' the shit with a buncha black ops goons. Hell, they're training kids out there. Squid go pro and shit."

"Quid pro quo," Miller said. "And who did you steal the hooch from?"

"One of those black ops goons," Eli said. "I couldn't sneak into Jericho's office."

Miller shook his head and put the bible on his lap. "Remember Hue City, Eli? Remember when I dragged your ass out of the rubble from that collapsed building? Remember when I saved your life?" Miller sat up. "Huh? Remember?"

"I know, I know," Eli said. "The afterlife was a great show, let me tell you. God and the angels dancing the Charleston with Hitler and Churchill. Hey, I think I saw Adam and Eve riding dinosaurs, too."

"I'm being serious, Eli," Miller said. "I didn't drag you out of that hell-hole just for you to bury your head in a bottle. You're better than this; you know you are."

"Yeah, speak for yourself," Eli scoffed. "You didn't see what

happens after this.”

“I think I’ll be ready when I do,” Miller said.

Eli laughed and took a sip from the flask.

“Yeah,” Eli grunted. “You think.”

Miller shook his head and opened the bible again. Eli laid down on the adjacent bunk and read the back of the bourbon bottle.

Inside of the armory, Gerald and Logan were loading bullets into magazines for their rifles. The concrete shelter was dimly lit with yellow bulbs on strings that seemed to never stop moving. Shadows shifted in the corners of the building. Gerald leaned against a metal rack and clicked bullets into the magazine of his M1911 pistol. He watched Logan loading rounds as well and cleared his throat.

“Y’know, Logan, we need to talk about what happened back on that hilltop,” Gerald said.

Logan didn’t acknowledge that he had heard Gerald. He brought the scope of the M40 to his eye and zeroed in. He put the bolt in place with a *clack*.

“Logan,” Gerald said.

“I know, I heard,” Logan muttered. “I just don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s getting worse, isn’t it?” Gerald asked.

Logan put the M40 over his shoulder and started to fill magazines for his M1911 as well. He tightened his lip as he worked. He tried to ignore Gerald’s gaze.

“Logan, talk to me,” Gerald said. He put his pistol into its holster and crossed his arms.

“You know it’s getting worse,” Logan said. His voice was thick in his throat. “I can’t take this much longer. I can’t stand it, they’re always telling me I’m doing wrong, that I’m guilty, that I’m all this and that.”

“You said it used to be just short episodes, right?” Gerald asked.

“Like before we were in Vulture Squad. Back then, it was only an episode every other week, right?”

“Right, then it started to happen every other day,” Logan said.

“Now it’s at least once a day. Some days, it just keeps going. The voices keep going nonstop, just hissing and whispering bullshit in my head.”

Logan’s hands were shaking. He put the clip of bullets and the magazine on a table. He wrapped his head in his hands and leaned

against a metal rack.

"Some nights, they're screaming," He muttered. "Some nights, I think they're just going to rip right through my head, and I don't know what'll happen to me after that. I'm scared they'll claw their way out and I won't be there anymore. I'm afraid they're going to take me over completely, and I won't be able to control myself. I don't want to lose myself, Gerald."

"I know you don't," Gerald said, and he placed a hand on Logan's shoulder. "You need to talk to somebody about this, man. I can't be the only person there for you anymore. I can try to help you, but I can't fix the problem. You need to find a way to do that yourself. I'm here for you, but you need to talk to Ryan, or you need to find some sort of Chaplain or something. Maybe you can get sent home and get the help you need."

Logan brushed off Gerald's hand. "I can't go home," he said. "I don't have any home to go to. You know that. This is all I've got left, anymore. I'll never be able to live back stateside; I have to stay out here. This is all my life will ever be. I *am* this. I'll never be anything else."

"Hey, don't be like that," Gerald said. "You can always get help. And I told you, when I'm out of here, you can always stay with me until you get on your feet. I trust you, Logan. I know you're a good guy. I know you'll never hurt me or anybody that doesn't deserve it."

Hurt hurt me rat rat bastard retard kill hurt rat

Logan stared, his lips twitching.

Gerald's eyes opened wide. "What are they saying?" he asked. Logan shook his head and turned away. He banged his fist on the metal rack.

"I just want it to stop, Gerald," Logan said. "I can't stop them anymore; they just keep going and going. They never quit. I'm scared one day they'll just never end, and all I'll ever hear is them, and nothing else ever again."

"That's why you have to get help *now*," Gerald said. He came to Logan's side. "You have to get help before you can't help it anymore. Come on, man, just promise me that you'll talk to Ryan about it. Before this mission, after this mission, whatever, just promise me you'll tell Ryan about it. He's your captain; he needs to know."

Logan nodded, and wiped his eyes.

The door to the armory pushed open, and Ryan stepped inside. The sound of the storm had momentarily ceased. Light raindrops fell through the door and pattered on the concrete floor. Ryan adjusted the mask on his face and cleared his throat.

“Ricardo’s ready to take us out of here,” Ryan said. “Be at the helicopter in five minutes.”

“Sounds good, boss,” Gerald said. “It’s about time we get those Green Beret out of this weather.”

“That’s the spirit,” Ryan said. He stepped back outside and shut the door behind him. Gerald watched the doorway for a few seconds, then turned to Logan.

“I’ll tell him after this mission,” Logan said. “Those Green Beret need us.”

Gerald smiled and slapped Logan on the shoulder.

“Yeah, god knows what they’ve gotten into.”

CHAPTER SIX – THE RUSSIANS

General Grigory Borodin leaned against the railing of the catwalk and drank a glass of vodka as he watched his soldiers working on the leviathan glass and steel frame of the Collider. Men with blow torches were welding steel in place around the porthole windows,

shouting to each other over the din of the chugging generators. An intense blue light pulsed from the within the chassis with the steady thump of a heartbeat. Borodin couldn't help but smile.

General Borodin felt like the father of his monstrous machine. He had watched it evolve from a series of blueprint sketches to the temple of space-age technology that stood before him.

Despite a disastrous misfire that had destroyed the prototype a year ago, he was determined to see the collider in all of its operational glory. He truly believed that the collider would be the saving grace of the once-great Russian empire; if only he could get it working in time.

Standing on Borodin's left was his chief scientist Misha, and on his right was Viktor, Borodin's second in command. Misha checked tallies on his clipboard and stared at the collider over the bridge of his hawkish nose.

"How much longer until the Collider has enough energy for a test-fire?" Borodin asked.

Misha scratched his pencil across the clipboard. "We should be ready in four to five days," he said. "If nothing goes wrong this time."

Borodin glared at Misha and tightened his grip on the glass of vodka.

"You would be wise to watch your words, Dr. Annushka," Borodin growled. "Unless you want to end up like Dr. Wynn."

Misha didn't look up from his clipboard. "We both know why Andrei Wynn's collider misfired, sir. We can't rush these things." Borodin felt the glass crack beneath his fingertips. He brought it to his lips and downed the remainder of biting vodka. He turned to face Misha and sagged against the catwalk railing. He flicked Misha's glasses further up the bridge of his nose and pointed a finger between his eyes.

"You would be wise to watch your words, comrade," Borodin slurred. "Or else I might slice out that blasphemous tongue of yours and feed it to the animals beyond these walls."

Misha's wide eyes crawled up from his clipboard.

Borodin grinned and continued to flick the glasses further up the length of Misha's nose. He laughed.

"Or, better yet, I'll have done to you what I had done to Andrei and his team," he said. "Don't forget where you are, comrade. This is Vietnam, and if a scientist from Moscow goes missing, nobody will

ever know.”

Misha’s beady eyes darted across Borodin’s lecherous smile. He backed away and held the clipboard to his chest. “I’m going to see about the preliminary tests,” he said. “The collider should be ready to fire within the next 48 hours, sir.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” Borodin said. He turned his back and watched as Misha scampered down the stairs to a console attached to the front of the collider. Borodin went to drink from his glass, realized it was empty, and tossed it aside with disdain. His right-hand man, Viktor, watched silently from behind a gas mask. “What’s wrong, sir?” Viktor hissed through the filter. “You should be merry; we’re days away from completing a decade-long project.” Borodin narrowed his eyes at the Collider’s blue heartbeat.

“It’s the Americans, Viktor,” he said. “They’re sticking their noses in where they don’t belong.”

Viktor nodded. “I remember when the blueprints were being drafted back in Moscow. I had to kill three American spies with my bare hands before we moved production to this shit-hole valley.”

“I thought that moving production to this valley would keep us away from American eyes, but I was wrong,” Borodin said. He fished the dog tags from his pocket and placed them in Viktor’s hand.

“Con Nhen, the Viet Cong Lieutenant moving our Polonium-T, found this on his way to pick up the last shipment,” Borodin said. “They also found a map leading into this valley.”

Viktor raised his head. “A map?”

Borodin nodded drunkenly.

“Yes, Viktor. A map. It appears that some Americans have been tracking our Polonium-T shipments, and they’ve been following the trail back to our section of the valley. Con Nhen said he didn’t find any signs of living Americans, so we don’t know if they managed to get close enough to find out what we’ve been working on.

“For all we know, they were killed by those...things out there before they could find us.”

Viktor clenched the dog tags. “Let me find the Americans, sir. I can track where they’ve been coming from and keep them from ever coming back.”

“No,” Borodin shook his head. “I can’t have you off on a wild goose chase; you’re much too valuable. Besides, I need you here to man our defensive perimeter. We need somebody dispensable to track

down the Americans. If we could get a squad to find where the Americans are coming from, or intercept them, that could be enough to buy us enough time to test the Collider.”

Borodin stroked his beard and stared at the collider’s throbbing light.

“How about Tolstoy Asimov and his squad?” Viktor said.

Borodin’s eyes opened wider. “Tolstoy is here?”

Viktor nodded. “He arrived a week ago. The Dogs of War, they’re called.”

Borodin nodded slowly.

“Yes, Viktor. Send the dogs of war. Give them the map that Con Nhen found and tell them their objectives. We have very important work to do if we’re going to reach our deadline.”

“Yes, sir,” Viktor said. He turned to leave, and Borodin pulled a curved piece of ivory from his pocket.

“Viktor,” he said.

Viktor glanced over his shoulder. Borodin stared back with dark eyes.

“Don’t mention a word of what lurks in these jungles. It would be a shame if we lost any more of our men because of these... discrepancies.”

Viktor nodded and walked down the stairs. Borodin turned and held the curved ivory in front of the collider. He hummed as he studied the object’s silhouette against the brilliant blue light.

The six-inch claw was stained with blood.

Throughout the compound, scientists and soldiers were bustling through the stinging rain. The wind and racket of machinery consumed their voices. Several bonfires were tucked into the corners of the perimeter walls.

Underneath the canopy that stretched over one such corner, a young man named Sergei Medvedev watched the flames of a bonfire dance beneath the rain. The leader of his squad, Tolstoy Asimov, paced around the fire with his hands held behind his back. “You will never forget your first kill, comrade,” Tolstoy said, staring at Sergei over the fire. “When you find your enemy in the sights of your rifle or in your hands as you heave a blade into his gut...you will never forget it. You will always remember the first time you ever spill the blood of another human being.”

The fire burned bright in Tolstoy’s eyes, and his voice was as dry as the wood crackling in the flames. He was a 42 year old man, and he

carried himself with the dignity and pride of an alpha wolf. Sergei was captivated by his mentor.

"I can still remember my first kill as clear as day," Tolstoy said. "We were in Stalingrad, pushing the German occupiers out of our homes. I was only seventeen years old. I never dreamt of killing a man, but when I found one in my crosshairs, I knew that I would never know a greater pleasure.

"The tension behind the trigger, the climatic release when the rifle kicked back, and then the man's head bursting like a cherry. I remember how the helmet flew off and clattered across the cobblestone into a puddle of rainwater. As clearly as my own reflection in the mirror, I remember that man hitting the ground, his legs swinging high in the air."

Tolstoy stopped pacing and sighed, shaking his head. He smiled at Sergei from across the fire.

"You will never know a greater pleasure, Sergei," he said. "You will have your chance."

The fire shined in Sergei's eyes like rubies. He could feel the heat in his chest, surging against his rib cage. He stared into the flames like they were his reflection, and in them he saw his months of relentless Spetsnaz training.

In the crackle of the fire, Sergei could hear the automatic gunfire ripping over his head. He felt the darkness, the cold pools of blood and barbed wire that he was forced to crawl through for hours on end. His eye twitched, a quick wink, and he took a deep breath. His training had transformed him from a misguided child to a ravenous soldier, ready to slaughter the enemy. He looked up to Tolstoy.

"I am ready, sir," Sergei said. "I am ready to kill for my country."

"Don't get your hopes up, Sergei," said Aleksandr. Sergei looked at the clean-shaven man sitting beside him, who was scribbling in a notebook. Aleksandr was 24 years old and soft spoken, with a monotone voice.

"Borodin probably won't even send us out. There's nothing to do and nobody to fight in this valley but shadows. Besides, there's no purpose to this 'war'. We aren't fighting Nazis like Tolstoy and Nikita did."

Nikita looked up from his game of solitaire across the bonfire. He was a barrel-chested man of 44, with thick arms and a moustache like a fat black caterpillar curled over his lip. His eyes were soft chestnuts, and his face was like creased leather. He nodded in

agreement with Aleksandr.

"Aleksandr's right," Nikita grunted. His voice was throaty, with a heavy accent. "There's really no point in us being in this country. We may as well be in Korea all over again."

Tolstoy shook his head as he paced around the fire. He scratched his goatee, smoothed his hair back. "You should have more pride in what we're doing. We're defending the Collider from outside attackers, and in doing so, we're helping to better the motherland! That's a good enough reason as any to take a man's life, whether he's an American or a South Vietnamese mongrel. We need to have faith in Borodin's orders; our efforts won't be wasted."

"We don't even know if it's going to be used for something good or not," Aleksandr said. "As far as we know, it could be a bomb, or even nerve gas. We don't know what it does."

"Just go back to writing your poetry, Aleks," Tolstoy said. "Don't discourage Sergei. He's worked very hard to join our ranks as Spetsnaz, and he should get his just reward. He should be excited to take a life for his country; it's the greatest honor one can get from his motherland."

Nikita laughed bitterly. "An honor," he scoffed.

"It's an honor to kill for your country, and if you don't take up that honor, then you're a coward and a traitor." Tolstoy crossed his arms and stared down at his comrade contemptuously. "To let the enemy live is to betray the motherland."

Nikita turned to Sergei.

"Just make the right choices," Nikita said. "You don't know how greatly you can change until it's too late, and trust me, comrade; you don't want to find out."

The fire sizzled beneath the rain drops that slipped through the canopy. Sergei contemplated Nikita's wisdom, but he was captivated by Tolstoy's patriotism. As Sergei saw it, Tolstoy was his true mentor; a hero, even. He knew that Tolstoy and Nikita served in World War Two together as teenagers, and they had been two of the first men to partake in the GRU Spetsnaz, Russia's Special Forces. They had completely different philosophies on war, and Sergei was used to getting lectured by both.

Aleksandr looked up from his scrawled poetry and motioned to the perimeter wall. "You have to wonder who they're keeping out," he said. "These walls are what, twenty-thirty feet tall? You don't think they expect a tank to tear through here, do you?"

"I don't know," Sergei muttered. "And you know, now that I think about it, you're right about the Collider. They've never told us what it's for, or what it does. Just that it's for the betterment of the motherland. It's almost like they're keeping us in the dark."

"You sound like paranoids," Tolstoy said. He sat down beside Nikita and tossed a stick into the fire. "Like I said, have faith in your government. They're trying to make our nation better. It's what we all want, isn't it? I have a family back in Stalingrad, and I'd like to think that I'm working to make their lives better while over here."

"I can agree with that," Nikita muttered. "My wife and daughter are the only reason I've stayed in this service as long as I have." "That's what we all want," Tolstoy said. "We just want to make our motherland better. We deserve better for what we've done for this military, this government. We deserve to have better cities for our children to be raised in, and our children's children. They deserve a stable economy and freedom from fear of poverty or starvation, or of terrible working conditions or war with the Americans. I'm willing to fight for that, comrades."

Tolstoy looked at Sergei. "I'm willing to kill and die to make our motherland better. Are you?"

Sergei nodded. He had been raised in an impoverished home, so he could understand Tolstoy's sentiments. Joining the military had been the first effort Sergei had made toward bettering his own life. If he hadn't, he would have had a bleak future in a factory, or even a gang. The military was his chance to make a decent living, and to maybe even make his homeland better for all. It was a noble goal, one that his entire squad shared.

"And you will have your wishes fulfilled, comrades."

Viktor emerged from the darkness into the light of the fire. Sergei shivered. Viktor's gas mask captured the flames in its lens, and his respirator made an eerie hiss. Tolstoy, however, smiled and embraced his friend.

"Ah, comrade! It's good to see you. We could use some encouragement; tell them what we're fighting for. What is the Collider, and why are we defending it in this valley?"

Viktor took a step back from Tolstoy and studied the others. Sergei looked away from Viktor's cold gaze.

"The Collider is being built as a new energy source, one that is completely replenishable and unending. We will break away from

the chains of coal and oil, and we will be able to bring electricity, heat, and light to every corner of our proud nation.

“The Americans have been hunting for our technology, and they won’t stop until we all lay dead at their feet. They want to take our Collider and weaponize it, just as they selfishly did with Atomic technology. They only care for destruction, not for salvation as we do.”

Sergei watched Viktor. He was unnerved by the mechanical way that he seemed to recite the speech from memory. Tolstoy, however, smiled broadly, proud that his faith had been restored. “And we are eager to fight for such a noble deed, comrade,” Tolstoy said. “We have only been here for a week, but we are ready for any task you may have for us. We will do anything to make our nation stronger. Anything.”

Nikita and Aleksandr shared an incredulous look.

“Good,” Viktor said, “Because Borodin has orders for our proud dogs of war. We have recently found signs of an American presence in the valley, and we believe they are coming after us. The Collider is being prepared for its final test firing, so in the mean time, we need to get the Americans off of our tail.

“That’s why we need you four to take care of them; track them down, intercept them, and find where they are coming from. If you can find them, take them prisoner and bring them back to us so we can find out what they know. We need to assure that they can’t touch our nation’s saving grace.”

Tolstoy smiled, and he looked at the others. Only Sergei smiled back.

Tolstoy grinned at Viktor. “When do we leave?”

Viktor handed Tolstoy the map. “Right now,” he said. “You’re traveling on foot. Follow this map; it should lead you to the Americans. Make them pay for what they’re trying to do. Make your motherland proud.”

Viktor saluted them and turned back into the storm, striding through the darkness towards the droning Collider. Tolstoy lifted his pack and Dragunov SVD rifle, turned to the others, and said, “What are you waiting for, comrades? We have some Americans to hunt!”

Sergei nodded and gathered his gear with Nikita and Aleksandr. He held his AK-47, which had never been used, and imagined aiming it at an American soldier. He could envision the spray of blood, the

crunch of bones being broken by runaway bullets. With a deep breath, he stared into the fire and saw himself in the flames. He was ready to kill for his country.

CHAPTER SEVEN – INTO THE JUNGLE

Once the storm subsided, Ryan and the men of Vulture Squad piled into the Father Vulture and flew north through the night. Brush-stroked clouds were stretched thin over the floodplains below, and the river that bisected the valley glittered like a ribbon of starlit glass in the distance. The basin of the valley sank deeper into the earth the further north they went, and the walls of the mountains tightened around the helicopter.

Ryan had the sensation of falling through the cracks in the earth. He felt a knot tighten in his stomach.

Jericho's warning repeated in his mind.

Don't lose this squad, Baker.

It'd be a shame if you failed McNeil twice.

Ryan tugged on his mask and sucked through his teeth. He watched the green carpeted walls of the valley rush past, edging closer, and he backed away from the window. He remembered running through a similar mountain range on his last mission with Captain McNeil and he felt the knot in his stomach tighten further.

The past was always following him, lingering in the back of his mind like a disease. He hated how it made him feel, how it made his fingers twitch and his skin crawl, but he couldn't let it go. It was impossible to escape the past.

Ryan clenched his fists and closed his eyes. He took slow, steady breaths to calm his heartbeat. He knew he needed to maintain his composure. When they landed, it would be up to him to keep his

men together and lead them through the wilderness. It was up to him to keep them alive and sane, and if he was going to do that, he had to do the same for himself.

Ryan opened his eyes and slowly exhaled.

He wouldn't fail McNeil again.

"I don't get it, Ryan," Gerald called across the helicopter. He was sitting next to Logan on the opposite end of the cabin. His arms were crossed over his chest and his brow was furrowed. "None of this makes any sense," he said.

"What doesn't make sense?" Ryan asked.

"Everything about this mission, man," Gerald said. He held out his hand and counted on his fingers. "First of all, General Jericho. What's he doing in this valley to begin with? We're in the middle of nowhere, what could possibly be of interest here? There's no cities, no roads, no strategic points for miles. He won't even tell us a single thing about his operation. That's shady."

Eli spat tobacco juice. "He's slimier than snail shit," he said.

"I know he's a prick, but he has his reasons," Ryan said. "You saw those concrete buildings. He's probably just investigating what those structures are for; simple reconnaissance."

"That's the other thing," Gerald said, leaning forward. "What the hell *are* those buildings? Why would the Viet Cong have concrete structures like *that*, in *this* valley, in the middle of nowhere? I can tell you right now we aren't bombing them. They aren't hiding from napalm or mortar-fire in those buildings. Those buildings can't belong to Charlie; the North Vietnamese Army, maybe, but no way is Charlie building bunkers like that up here. No way."

"Okay, so what if they *are* NVA bunkers?" Miller asked. "What's the big deal?"

"That's the thing; I don't think they *are* bunkers," Gerald replied. "A guy like Jericho, a guy with his nose all the way up here, there's no way he's just interested in some bunkers. He's got SOG and Green Beret working for him, and now he's got us cleaning up the mess. And he won't even tell us what they're after, even if it's just 'Viet Cong' or 'NVA' bunkers? *Bullshit.*"

"So, what are you suggesting?" Miller asked. "Some sort of conspiracy?"

"I don't know, but look, man, he's General *fucking* Jericho!" Gerald exclaimed. "He's probably taking orders from the Pentagon, or

Secretary Clifford, or even the president. I say he's investigating something really big, or something really bad if he won't let us know about it. Whatever's brewing in this valley, whatever he's smelling and tracking down, he must want a pretty big bite out of it for all this," he said, motioning out the window.

"Jericho wouldn't leave us in the dark without a good reason,"

Ryan said flatly. "If there's more to this mission, he would have told us. He wouldn't hide vital information from us."

"You don't sound very confident, sir," Leon said.

Ryan shook his head and looked outside.

"Wait, so you think they really are hiding something from us?"

Miller asked, turning to Gerald. "'Cause if you are, that's fucked up. Do you really think the government or our own military would lie to us?"

"Look, I'm just saying that something big is brewing in this valley,"

Gerald said. He lit a cigarette and took a drag. "Jericho's after something that we aren't supposed to find out about, and that's scary," he exhaled. "I'm just saying we should be careful."

"Wait a minute, just hold on a minute now," Eli interjected. "Is this The Twilight Zone?"

Miller and Leon laughed, and although Gerald rolled his eyes, he laughed as well.

"Alright, everybody, enough," Ryan said. "We're on a need to know basis, and all we need to worry about is finding those missing Green Beret. We don't need to worry about whatever Jericho's greater purpose for them is, or what he wants to do in this valley, so I don't want to hear any more conspiracy theories. If there was something more for us to worry about in this valley, Jericho would have told us about it. Case closed."

"You still don't sound very confident in that, sir," Leon said.

Ryan frowned. Leon was right; he didn't trust General Jericho.

When Ryan had been in McNeil's squad, they were tasked with scouting out an NVA military base in the mountains just north of the DMZ. Jericho had told them that there weren't any Viet Cong militias in the area, but his intel was flawed. There had been Viet Cong scouts, some of which had escaped from Vulture Squad, and they fled to tell the NVA. The mission was a failure, and Ryan had never had a chance to make it up to McNeil. Until now.

"Just have a little faith in your superiors," Ryan said. "All that matters is that there are missing soldiers out there, and we need to

get them back home alive. What Jericho's doing isn't important to us. The safety of our brothers is what's important."

Everybody nodded in silent agreement.

"Fucking right," Eli grunted.

Xavier sat upright in the seat across from Ryan. He wiped the condensation from the window and narrowed his eyes. "What the hell..." he muttered. "Hey boss, come get a look at this."

Ryan leaned forward and Xavier tapped the glass with his finger. "Down there, you see it?" Xavier asked. "That big trail?"

Peering through the thin cloud cover, Ryan saw a pale streak carved through the jungle, bridging a large floodplain to the river's edge. When he looked closer, he saw that the streak was created by a break in the canopy where all the trees had been trampled or crushed. Some of the trees that were still standing were snapped in half like toothpicks stuck into the soil.

"What the hell is that?" Ryan asked.

"It looks like some sort of game trail," Xavier said, "But more massive than anything I've ever seen."

"So what do you think did that?" Ryan asked. "Asiatic elephants?"

"I don't know," Xavier said, shrugging. "It would take a massive herd to tear down that much jungle. That has to be a multi-storied canopy; that means some of those trees could be well over a hundred feet tall and several feet thick. Maybe the storm knocked some of those trees down, but I doubt it."

"So, what else could have done that?" Ryan asked. "Tanks?"

Xavier shook his head. "Like I said, I have no idea. I can't imagine why a battalion of tanks would make a pointless path to the river, and I don't think a storm would have made a perfect line like that. Whatever did that had to have been a herd of animals...really, *really* big animals..." Xavier frowned, lost in thought.

"I told you, they're hiding something," Gerald muttered.

Ryan shot him a look and Gerald raised his hands in defense. Ryan watched the game trail until it passed beneath them, and he sat back in his seat. A nervous silence filled the cabin. The rotor blades thumped in a steady beat.

Ryan could tell the squad's lack of information was making their imaginations run wild. Ryan had seen many men become crazed with paranoia because of their runaway fantasies. In the jungle, fear was as likely to get you killed as your enemy.

It was another hour until they reached the exfil point.

“Here we are,” Ricardo said over the loudspeaker. “This is the last position that the Green Beret reported from. Best of luck, Vultures.” The helicopter banked and circled a field of elephant grass surrounded by towering trees. Ryan loaded his rifle and took the door latch in hand. Everybody was tensed and ready; Eli crammed fresh tobacco under his lip and slapped his helmet. Gerald sucked his cigarette and blew smoke through his nostrils until he was lost in a cloud.

Ryan’s heart hammered in sync with the thumping rotor blades. The helicopter dropped below the tree-top canopy and settled into the grass. Ryan bounced on his heels, gathered his energy, and threw the door open.

The wind of the rotor blades roared in Ryan’s face. The field rippled in waves beneath the helicopter. Ryan stood in the doorway and slapped each of the men on the shoulder as they hopped into the chest-high grass. When the last man was out, Ryan closed the cabin door and leapt into the field, rolling to his feet.

Ryan kicked through the grass and gathered in a circle with the others. They stared over their rifles at the jungle with their backs turned to each other. Ryan stepped into the center of the group and watched as the Father Vulture ascended.

The roar of the helicopter’s rotor blades slowly dwindled to an echoing heartbeat and gave way to silence. Ryan puffed steam through the fabric of his mask. The air was cold and damp, thick with moisture. The grass was stirred by a gentle breeze, and a thin mist flurried above the field, shimmering like a crystal veil in the moonlight. The grass shone dull silver beneath a sea of stars.

Ryan slowly exhaled.

“Alright, Vultures. This is where the last radio signal from the Green Beret came from. We’re going to split up and spread out across the clearing, to search for any signs of their presence. Gerald and Logan, go north. Eli and Miller, east. Xavier, south. Leon and I will go west. When you find something, come to the center of the clearing, and we’ll regroup. Move out.”

The squad spread out and crept through the elephant grass. Ryan walked with Leon, sweeping his rifle back and forth at the jungle’s edge. The see-saw buzz of cicada flowed between the grass and the overhanging canopy. A chattering gibbon howled from the bough of

a tree and a second gibbon returned the sound of alarm from across the clearing. Bats swooped and squeaked through the clouds of mosquitoes around Ryan's head.

Leon watched the jungle with starry eyes as they approached, captivated by the haunting chorus of nocturnal wildlife. Ryan, however, was focused on the powerful smell of rot in the air. The soft ground sank beneath Ryan's boots. He shouldered through the grass and scanned around his feet, but it was difficult to see through the thicket. They searched for several minutes, walking in widening arcs across the clearing, closer and closer to the jungle's edge.

Ryan's heartbeat hurried with each step closer to the imposing mouth of the forest. The trees at the edge of the clearing towered a hundred feet high, and the thick undergrowth created a wall of vegetation that swallowed the faint moonlight. The darkness beneath the tree tops was thicker than ink.

A slurried mixture of animal cries echoed from the depths of the jungle, and hearing it put the hair on Ryan's neck on end. He knew that when they walked into the jungle, they would be in another world entirely, a world where man was weak and vulnerable.

Ryan paused a few meters from the jungle's edge. Footprints were stamped into the ground at his feet. He stooped down to examine the tracks. They appeared to be bird tracks; three thin toes extending from a curved heel.

What struck Ryan was how large the footprints were; he could easily place a foot inside of a single toe. Ryan glanced over his shoulder and saw the trail of footprints led from the center of the clearing. Leon hummed thoughtfully over Ryan's shoulder.

"Looks like an emu print," Leon said.

"What the hell's an emu?" Ryan asked.

"An emu's a type of large flightless bird from Australia. They have huge talons on their feet that they use to fight. That's what this is like, but way bigger. I'm not sure what the hell an oversized emu or ostrich would be doing all the way out here, though."

Ryan stared at the footprint. He looked up at the darkness of the jungle and listened intently to the cacophony of animal songs. There were a lot of sounds that he recognized, like monkeys, birds, and tree frogs. However, he also heard some sounds he wasn't familiar with. There was a deep, rumbling bass lying beneath all of the other cries of the animals. It made Ryan think of a whale's

mournful song.

Ryan chewed on his lip as his mind began to put together images of creatures from his nightmares, of the tigers and moon bears that lived in the jungles of Vietnam. He had heard tales of man eaters, mostly from Xavier, but he had never personally encountered any. He hoped he never would.

"Come on, let's back-track these prints," Ryan said. He raised his rifle and stayed low to the ground, following the footprints with Leon in tow. It was difficult work; the footprints were spaced far apart, painting a picture of a creature with a long, striding gait.

The footprints weren't pushed firmly into the ground, which suggested it was a relatively lightweight and nimble animal. Some of the footprints were hardly noticeable; the creature had barely made an impact on the soft turf. It was remarkable, yet troubling. The trail led all the way to Eli and Miller, who were returning from their search. Ryan stood up and asked them what they had to show. "Jack shit," Miller said. "Just a bunch of feathers."

Eli stepped out from behind Miller, with a crest of feathers stuck in the front of his helmet. He silently whooped, patting his hand over his mouth as he hopped in a circle around them.

Ryan snatched the feathers from Eli's helmet and handed them to Leon, who studied them intently beneath the moonlight.

"What gives?" Eli asked. "They're just feathers."

They ignored him. Each feather was the length of Leon's forearm, with a thick stem. They were a gradient of light and dark green with brown and tan striations. Leon turned the feathers over in his hands.

"Do those look like Emu feathers to you?" Ryan asked.

"No, I've never seen feathers like this before," Leon muttered.

"Who cares?" Eli asked. "I just thought they looked neat."

"Just trying to figure things out," Ryan said. Straight ahead, he saw Xavier walking empty-handed across the field. His face was grim and pale. Logan and Gerald came running over from the other side of the clearing. Something green was bouncing in Logan's arms.

"What'd you find?" Ryan asked.

"A backpack," Logan said. He handed Ryan a dark green rucksack. It was badly torn and covered in dark red stains. Ryan felt the contents rustle as he turned it over in his hands.

"We didn't look inside; we thought you should," Gerald said.

Ryan nodded and turned to Xavier. "Did you find anything?"

Xavier shook his head. "Not exactly."

"What do you mean?" Ryan asked.

"Well, I found a lot of animal scat," Xavier said. "It looked like bird shit. Mostly white, but there was a lot of it. And it was pretty big, too. Piles of it."

Ryan frowned and looked at Leon, who shrugged. Ryan lifted the pack and sniffed the dark stains. It had a faint metallic smell, like copper. It was blood.

"Well, shit," Ryan murmured. He unzipped the backpack and rifled through the contents inside. There were a couple clips of ammunition, an empty canteen, and a package of C-Rations. Ryan handed the ammunition to Leon and gave the C-Rations to Logan. At the bottom of the rucksack was a stack of paper, but most of it was soggy and illegible. He found a small journal with a yellowed scrap of paper for a bookmark. Ryan took it out and studied it closely.

The bookmark was a torn fragment of a map. It showed one of the mountain peaks of the valley, with sketches of what appeared to be blueprints for a fence on top. Beside the fence, there were arrows drawn back and forth, with X's at each end. There were notes in what appeared to be Russian, but the ink was too smeared for Ryan to be sure. They seemed to be skirmish plans; search-and-destroy objectives. Ryan slipped it into his pocket.

He flipped through the journal and skimmed diary entries, letters to be sent home, and notes taken during the mission. Most of the entries were too intimate and personal for Ryan to feel comfortable reading, but he did find something of interest in the second to last page. It was mostly coded gibberish, but the very center had a sketch of the photograph Jericho had shown them. There were numbers beside each concrete structure and a note at the very bottom.

Res/Stat 1 – Defunct, Destroyed

Res/Stat 2 – Defunct, Destroyed, Partial Evidence (Perimeter?)

Res/Stat 3 – Defunct, Destroyed

Res/Stat 4 –

Ryan furrowed his brow. He took out his own map, circled the structure that the Green Beret had marked as "Res/Stat 4," and returned it to his pocket. He went to the last entry of the journal and found a single paragraph, dated as the same day that Jericho received his last report from the Green Beret platoon. The writing

had been scrawled with shaking hands. Ryan struggled to read the last two sentences, but when he did, cold fingers traced his spine.

Ryan put the journal in his rucksack. "Gerald, Logan, did you guys notice anything unusual around the pack? Feathers, footprints, anything?"

"Yeah, we did," Gerald said. "We found some spent bullet shells and a couple footprints. It looked like there was some sort of struggle, but whatever happened, the guy had to have gotten away. We couldn't find the body. He probably tossed his backpack and ran."

Ryan nodded and exhaled. The others were silent. Ryan felt a shift in the air, of slipping further into uncertainty. They were no closer to the answers they needed, but they had a destination. He looked at the men and said, "Alright, Vultures. We have the final location the Green Beret were heading to. Let's move on and see if they made it there or not."

The men followed Ryan towards the jungle. It loomed over them, ancient and deadly, like a beast from a different time. They cautiously stepped into its mouth, submerging themselves in the wet, claustrophobic undergrowth. As Ryan sank into the darkness, he thought of the last two lines from the journal and shivered.

We lost Lewis last night.

We're being hunted.

CHAPTER EIGHT – HUNTED

The heart of the jungle was primordial and untamed. The roots of towering banyan trees gripped the earth like the knuckle-deep hands of giants. Listless serpentine vines, shaggy and green with moss, dangled from the treetops. Scant moonlight filtered through the layers of canopy. The ground was choked with vegetation; king ferns sprung ten feet high, and waxy-leaved rubber plants grew intertwined with the lush banana trees and jagged palm fronds.

Leon was amazed with the diversity of the jungle, the untouched splendor of pure wilderness. His jaw hung slack as he stared at the canopy and stepped over the wooden tendrils of a banyan's roots.

"God," Leon whispered breathlessly.

Ryan didn't share Leon's youthful sense of wonder. He walked slowly, feeling the rotting forest floor sink beneath his feet. He stared over the undergrowth, past the trees, to the mist lingering in the space beyond. The canopy was loud with the revelry of horn-bill

birds and chirping monkeys. He glanced to the tree tops and saw the gleaming red eyes of a bear cat on an overhanging branch. The air smelt of mold and mildew, the decay of plant and animal matter.

Ryan knew that for all its beauty, the jungle was an ecological temple of life, death, and rebirth. The nature of death, however, was at the forefront of his mind.

For the past hour, Ryan's nerves had been gradually pulled taut like the strings of a puppet. Jericho's warning and the final journal entry of the Green Beret had formed a cyclical chant in his head.

The question of what had been hunting the Green Beret filled Ryan with a limitless potential of phobias. He found himself scanning the shadows for any sign of a phantom, be it animal or man. Viet Cong guerillas could have been stalking the Green Beret, but Ryan didn't think a Special Forces soldier would have felt that amount of fear from guerillas in the brush. The Green Beret were hunters; only a greater predator could scare a hunter.

We're being hunted.

Ryan let go of his breath and loosened his grip on the rifle; the prospect of a man eater cooled his blood. It tapped into a primitive instinct that sent adrenaline coursing through his veins. Ryan knew that in the jungle, even the most dangerous and heavily armed soldier was little more than a weak, fragile animal. It was a primal fear that Ryan had seen in the eyes of all men.

Even Xavier, an expert hunter, would stand little chance of survival if he encountered an aggressive tiger or bear. Ryan understood that he and his men were vulnerable beings marching through the domain of monsters. They were at the mercy of the jungle.

Ryan could see the anxiety in the eyes of his men, flicking left and right. Their silhouettes were hunched and slow-moving. Logan twitched his head in the direction of any sound he heard. Eli stood close to Miller, quietly chewing tobacco and spitting onto the forest floor.

Xavier had the tense, crouched posture of a hunter. He fully understood the danger of the wilderness, and while he had a better grasp of the natural world than the others, he was just as aware of his vulnerability. The only person that seemed unaffected by fear was Leon, who was too naïve to sense the true underlying danger that surrounded them.

Ryan let go of his breath. He was getting too paranoid; he needed to keep his imagination at bay. Instead of focusing on the fear that they shared or the mysterious nature of their mission, Ryan tried to gain a better sense of his surroundings. He lowered his rifle and checked his compass, noting that they were going north-east. Clicking the compass shut, he glanced at its scratched silver surface and rubbed his thumb over the name engraved on its back.

Adam McNeil.

Ryan's former captain had always been level-headed in the jungle. McNeil had been native to the green mountains of North Carolina, so he was used to journeying through dense wilderness.

When Ryan first joined Vulture Squad, he had been so easily frightened in the wild. He knew that imminent death could hide in any shadow, or any shroud of vegetation. McNeil had taught Ryan to pay close attention to his surroundings, as the greatest clues the jungle gave you were provided by its own inhabitants. The behavior of the animals was an indicator of potential danger, he had been told.

Ryan slipped the compass back into his pocket. He had been so lost in thought that he had failed to notice a perceptible shift in the atmosphere.

The jungle was silent.

Ryan's heartbeat fluttered, and he felt a familiar rush of adrenaline. The groaning frogs, chattering monkeys, and even the buzzing insects had all fallen silent.

Ryan glanced over his shoulder and saw that the others had slowed down as well upon noticing the silence. Logan and Gerald looked around with their rifles. Eli and Leon stared into the tree tops. Xavier's nostrils flared; his eyes were wide. A soft breeze stirred the canopy, gently rustling through the palm fronds. Ryan raised his hand and made a circling motion for the others to get closer. They gathered around Ryan and aimed their rifles at the surrounding forest. Ryan led the way. The sudden, entombing silence made their jostling equipment sound impossibly loud. Ryan looked up at the overhanging branches and saw that none of the animals were out, not even the chirping tree frogs that usually sang throughout the night.

He had never seen anything like it, the jungle so perfectly calm and quiet as if it were holding its breath. It made his palms sweat. Ryan felt his pulse pounding in his ears.

An anguished howl ripped through the canopy. Everybody stopped and swung their rifles in the direction of the cry. It was a painful and deranged scream that sent Ryan's hair on end, but he recognized it as a gibbon; a tree-top ape.

Ryan grunted and lowered his rifle. The scream faded to an echo that drifted aimlessly through the forest. No other creature returned the call. Ryan didn't see anything stirring in the jungle, so he turned and continued to lead the way.

They moved quickly through the silence of the forest. Ryan led the group around the spires of tree trunks, carefully stepping over sprawling roots. Eli tripped beneath the foliage, and Logan pulled him back to his feet. Miller looked back and forth as he ran, scanning the endless expanse of tree forest with his rifle. No matter how far they ran, the only sound came from their rattling equipment, panting breath, and muffled footsteps.

Ryan's heart hammered against his ribcage. His pulse throbbed. He didn't understand why the jungle had become silent, but it was terrifying, and he wanted to get away from the silence as quickly as he could. He saw Eli take a swig from his flask, gasping for air as he ran.

Ryan knew that his fear was carrying him away. He was being too paranoid, running from phantoms in the dark. He was ashamed of his fear, for letting the others get spooked because of his own paranoia, so he let go of his breath and slowed down. His boots hit the ground heavily, and he trudged to a stop at the bottom of a short hill. He panted and looked over his shoulder at the rest of the squad a few meters back.

In his own fear, he had nearly left them behind. He felt pathetic; he wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

Ryan steadied his breathing and listened to the silence. The buzz of tinnitus filled his ears. He doubled over with his hands on his knees and stared at the ground. His panting respirations seemed abnormally loud. He looked up and studied the darkness. The beams of the squad's flashlights were swinging and intersecting over his head. As his breathing slowed down, he began to detect a deep, rumbling bass beneath his respirations. Ryan's eyes widened and his muscles tensed.

Something *else* was breathing.

Ryan was wrenched off of his feet and he hit the ground face-first. He screamed for help as he was dragged through the undergrowth,

away from his squad. Something had his ankle in a vice grip; he could feel teeth digging into his skin through the canvas of his boots.

Ryan shouted and kicked blindly. The stalks and stems of the undergrowth flew past in a dark blur of green. He grasped at the earth and pulled up handfuls of damp soil. His attacker snorted and hissed. He felt its deep growl resonating through his bones. Ryan screamed again and he heard the others, frighteningly far away, shouting after him. Their voices were fading fast.

Ryan flailed, twisted his torso, and rolled onto his back, briefly kicking his attacker in the face. All he saw of his attacker was a black blur.

Ryan craned his neck and met the tawny eyes of the predator. Its jaws were locked around his boot, and its fangs were hooked through the fabric. Ryan yelled and kicked the creature's snout, but it swiped its claws and nearly ripped his throat open. He swung his pistol at the creature and fired a shot at it. The creature growled lowly, a powerful rumble that shook Ryan's vision, and it squeezed its jaws.

Ryan couldn't muster any thoughts; his head was hollow and swimming with adrenaline. He screamed, and bullets suddenly tore through the foliage around him. The creature yowled as lead scraped its skin. Footsteps pounded over, and more gunshots flashed. The creature snarled and looked deeply into Ryan's eyes, seeing into him, seeing *through* him.

With one last painful squeeze of its jaws, the creature let go of Ryan and turned around, swinging a long, stiff tail past his face. The creature towered over him on muscular legs and shrieked horrifically at the others. Blood flecked from its howling maw.

Somebody screamed, and more gunshots filled the air. The creature turned and dove back beneath the foliage, sprinting away. Ryan scrambled to his feet, winced painfully, and saw that the creature was gone. As quickly as it had appeared, it had vanished into the forest.

"What the fuck was that?!" Miller yelled, looking back and forth.

"I've never seen nothing like that! Did anybody see where it went?"

"Fuck if I know," Gerald replied.

"It was what, eight, ten feet tall?" Leon asked.

"Shit, looked like a giant turkey, if you ask me," Eli said.

"Good thing nobody asked you," Gerald said.

“Whatever it was, it’s gone now,” Ryan said. He let go of a shuddering breath and took a plaintive step. His ankle was throbbing and sore, but it would heal. He reclaimed his CAR-15 from the undergrowth.

“Come on, let’s keep moving. We need to get as much distance between us and...whatever that thing was, as quickly as possible.” “It’s not that easy,” Xavier said gravely. He walked up to Ryan and looked at his ankle, then crouched and examined the forest floor for footprints.

“What do you mean?” Ryan asked.

“Whatever it was, it’s not scared of people,” Xavier said. He ran his fingers along the length of a nearly imperceptible footprint in the soil.

“If it’s like most man eaters, it won’t be scared to come back to claim its meal. We need to get out of its territory before it follows your scent.”

“How big do you think its territory would be?” Ryan asked.

“I would guess sixty square miles, if it’s a tiger,” Xavier said. “So, easily all of this valley. I don’t think we’ll be getting away from it as long as we’re here.”

“Well, at least it knows that we aren’t an easy meal,” Ryan said. “Let’s move. We need to find a safe place to set up camp. We’ll keep moving in the morning.”

Ryan raised his rifle and hobbled forward, following his compass north-east. The others trailed after him and surveyed the forest over the barrels of their rifles. Leon stared wide-eyed at the jungle canopy and heard the distant, echoing shriek of the creature reverberating through the valley. The shriek was answered by a similar call, and then another, until the valley seemed to be filled with the otherworldly scream.

Whatever had attacked Ryan was not alone.

CHAPTER NINE – DRIFTING

After hours of hiking, Sergei found himself on a hill top with a vista of the entire valley. A full moon was suspended above the cragged mountain tops, pouring silver light over the floodplains and jungle below. Lush treetops billowed like landlocked clouds of glistening jade in the valley's basin. A waterfall tumbled through the crevice of conjoined mountain walls and drained into the river with roaring breath.

Sergei shut his eyes and allowed the haunting cries of the nocturnal wildlife to echo through his body. He had never known such beauty; it contrasted sharply with his life back in Russia, in the dregs of a failing city.

Sergei's life in Russia had consisted of shades of pallor and grey, stained concrete and dirty snow beneath dead white skies. He had never so much as ventured out of his home-town, and now he was suddenly in a tropical paradise thousands of miles away.

While his home-town had been a frigid wasteland filled with people wasting away in poverty, Vietnam seemed alive and rich with natural beauty. Instead of rancid exhaust fumes, he smelled damp earth and the scent of sweet orchids carried on rain-washed winds. Rather than the incessant barking of dogs, blaring car horns, and the march of shoes on cobblestone, he heard the peaceful undulation of the jungle's nighttime ambiance. It made his heart swell, to feel he was finally where he belonged.

"It's so beautiful," Sergei muttered. "I wish I could stay forever." "The natural world is beautiful, but man disfigures her through abuse and violence," Aleksandr said. He walked to the edge of the hilltop and gazed over the valley basin, listening to the faraway crash of the waterfall feeding the river.

"In time, this too shall become little more than a barren landscape of scarred earth. It happens to anything that the war touches."

"Don't listen to the hopeless romantic," Tolstoy grunted. He sat down on a log, polishing his Dragunov SVD sniper rifle with a handkerchief.

"Remember that the wilderness is an alluring mistress. She may seem welcoming, but she will swallow you whole in an instant and make a meal of your bones. Man destroys and distances himself from nature for a reason: to survive."

“A hopeless romantic?” Aleksandr asked. He raised an eyebrow. “Please. I’m a realist. My observations might sound eloquent, but that’s because they’re masking the ugly face of reality. And don’t get me started on survival.”

“Ha! Survival,” Nikita chuffed, stumbling out of the forest behind them. His face shone like an apple, flushed crimson and shining with sweat. He sat down beside Tolstoy and took desperate gulps from his canteen. He wiped his mouth off with a grimace. “I’ll be lucky to survive another day of hiking through this forest.” Sergei laughed, but Aleksandr and Tolstoy remained silent. They looked away from each other. Nikita laid back and closed his eyes.

Aleksandr sat on his haunches and observed the lush landscape stretched before him. He noticed that there were holes in the canopy where large trees had been stripped barren of their leafy tops. Aleksandr narrowed his eyes and scratched his chin. He normally would have assumed they were diseased or dead, but instead of the holes in the canopy being grouped together, they were scattered across the jungle. It seemed unnatural to him.

“What is combat *really* like, Aleks?”

Aleksandr’s train of thought was broken. He glanced at Sergei, who had been watching him expectantly.

“I’ve never heard your thoughts on it,” Sergei said. “You’re always buried in your journal.”

Aleksandr faced the moon. He knotted his fingers together as he struggled to find the right words. He thought of Korea, working behind enemy lines, slitting throats and hearing screams in the night. He could always hear the screams of those dying men as clearly as an old song in the back of his mind. He tried not to listen. “It’s the most beautiful and awful thing in the world,” Aleksandr said softly. “I’ve seen things so beautiful in combat. I’ve seen the ground blossom like a lotus beneath the feet of men, swallowing them in swirling petals of fire and smoke. I’ve been shot and lucid during fire fights, staring at the grass and dirt beneath me, seeing it more clearly and intensely than anything I ever had before, knowing that it may be the last thing I ever see.

“The act of fighting...it’s a bit of a dance through the fields that lie between life and death, where your soul is high inside your own body, ready to escape at any moment. It’s a spiritual feeling, one more powerful than any I had ever known.”

“Wow,” Sergei breathed. He looked from his hands to the sky. “It

sounds scary, but incredible. I wouldn't mind feeling elevated, for once in my life."

Aleksandr sighed.

"Elevated is one word for it. 'High' is another. The adrenaline rush of fighting...it's addicting. I'll be honest, I never felt more alive than when I was risking my life. But it doesn't come without its price. Like any drug, it takes. It takes a little bit from you each time you become involved. Soon, you start questioning if you had always been this way, or if those pieces of you had been replaced with something else..."

His eyes found his feet.

"Just hope that when the bullets are flying, you make the right choices," Aleksandr said. "What we do here isn't temporary. What happens to us stays with us forever, in more ways than you could possibly imagine."

Sergei nodded. "I hope I make the right decisions," he said. "All I want is to do better for myself, and hopefully my country. I just want to do right."

"The world isn't black and white, Sergei," Aleksandr said. "Morality is a gradient, infinite shades of light and darkness. You may drift through it, but even when you think you're in the light, you're still in the shadows. You don't know who you're hurting until the damage is done. Remember that."

Sergei frowned. He couldn't imagine what Aleksandr wrote about in his journal.

They remained silent. The river yawned in the distance, a gentle exhalation of water running against the shore. The waterfall at the end of the valley roared like wind.

Aleksandr adjusted his weight on his haunches, and he placed his AK-47 across his knees. He was ready for the mission that lay ahead, but he was afraid for the young rookie. He understood what combat could do to a young man, especially one as impressionable as Sergei.

The clattering report of automatic rifles suddenly echoed below them. Sergei jumped and held his rifle high.

"What the hell was that?" Nikita asked. "Where did that come from?"

"Down there," Aleksandr said, pointing to the jungle below, to the right. They heard more gunshots echo from the forest, followed by shouting voices.

Tolstoy's eyes narrowed as he listened. He raised his Dragunov rifle. "Americans," he growled.

"What do you think they're doing?" Sergei asked, wide eyed.

"I'm not sure," Tolstoy said. "But we're going to find out. Come on."

Tolstoy turned and ran down the hill, back the way they came, into the darkness of the jungle. Nikita chased after him, and Aleksandr started to run.

Sergei froze at the edge of the forest, listening to the crackle of gunfire, and he felt his palms begin to sweat. He thought of what Aleksandr had said, and the AK-47 shook in his hands.

He was ready to kill, but he was not ready to die.

CHAPTER TEN – THE CAMPSITE

After a long and tense hike through the jungle, the men of Vulture Squad stumbled upon a circular clearing of trampled vegetation and barren, fractured trees. Some of the trees had been snapped in half, with jagged tips that speared the celestial open sky. The dissipated smell of musk and urine hung in the damp air. Ryan wrinkled his nose in disgust. The rest of the squad hesitated at the fringe of the forest.

Ryan was the first to step into the clearing; the crushed foliage was soft and welcoming beneath his boots. He looked over his shoulder at Xavier.

"What do you think did this, Xavier?" Ryan asked. "Was it that... thing?"

"I'm not sure," Xavier said. He stepped cautiously into the clearing. "It looks like some of these trees were pushed over by a heavy weight; some of them are even broken in half. I have no idea what could have done that other than an elephant, but even an elephant would have had a hard time doing this. I mean, look-"

Xavier pointed to a massive kapok tree that stood in the center of the clearing. The trunk was fractured in half, the jagged crown high above the other trees. It loomed over the clearing as an ancient monolith. The other trees were miniscule and slender in comparison.

"That trunk is easily four feet in diameter," Xavier said. "I doubt any elephant could have done that."

"Shouldn't we be more concerned with whatever the hell attacked Ryan?" Gerald asked. "For all we know, we're still in Tiger country."

"If it *was* a tiger," Leon said. "It could've been a bear."

"Guys, I don't want to hear anymore about tigers or bears," Ryan said.

"Oh my," Gerald said, rolling his eyes.

"Seriously," Ryan said. "We've been humping it all night. I'm sure we're out of that animal's territory by now, so we should just settle down and get some rest. We can pick up the trail again tomorrow morning."

"Actually, most tigers have a territory range anywhere from 20 to 60 square miles," Xavier said. "I doubt we're out of its territory. If anything, it probably has dominion over this entire valley. And if it does, that means it may still be tracking us. Hunting us, even."

"Well, now we know who's got first watch tonight," Ryan said.

"We're setting up camp. We'll rotate who has to stay up and keep watch while the others sleep. Xavier will go first, and in an hour Logan will, and so on and so forth. Leon and I will do a quick patrol of the perimeter, and in two hours Miller and Gerald will do the second patrol. Everybody clear on that?"

"If I kill the tiger, can I keep its pelt?" Eli asked. "I always wanted a fur coat."

"No," Ryan said. "And if I see you wearing fur, I'll skin you alive."

"Jokes on you; my skin's *worthless*," Eli sneered.

"If there aren't any other questions, then we're out. Get some rest," Ryan said. He led Leon into the jungle, and they were quickly engulfed within the undergrowth.

The rest of Vulture Squad went about setting up their tents around the broken kapok tree in the center of the clearing. Eli watched the edge of the clearing until he was sure Ryan was far enough away not to hear.

"Now that Captain Crab-Ass is gone, what do you guys think that was back there?" Eli asked, turning to Gerald and Miller. "My money's on a giant bird, or whatever left those feathers and shit back at the field we dropped in at."

"A giant bird? Seriously?" Gerald asked. He was on his knees assembling tent poles with Logan. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. It's obviously a tiger."

"If it was a tiger, Ryan would've been dead," Xavier spoke up.

"They bite the throat and cut the windpipe like wire-cutters; slice it right out."

"Maybe it was an inept tiger," Eli said. "My money's on a giant emu or something like that. You saw the feathers. You gotta put two and two together, man."

Miller shook his head. "Maybe it was Charlie, trying some sort of creepy gimmick. You know those guys are always trying to spook GI's in crazier and crazier ways. I heard once that a platoon of guys in the My Lai province had Charlie stalkin' them in the middle of the night, making these weird howling sounds the entire time. Trying to make 'em go crazy before they attacked."

"So, what, Ryan got attacked by Charlie in a costume or some shit?" Gerald asked. "There's no way, as much as I'd like to imagine a pair of Viet Cong in a two-person donkey suit trying to spook us."

The men laughed, but Logan was scratching his scalp beneath his confederate bandana. His head twitched and he shut his eyes.

"Stop," he whispered. "Stop it. Stop."

"Stop what?" Eli asked.

Logan opened his eyes and saw that the others were staring at him. He cast his eyes to his hands. "Nothin', just this talk of Charlie," he muttered. "It's getting me anxious for a fire fight, is all."

Eli eyed Logan suspiciously, but he returned to rummaging through his rucksack. Logan scratched the back of his neck and went back to erecting his tent.

Gerald watched Logan for a beat, then called out to Xavier, "So what do you say, Xaves? What happened to Ryan back there in the bush?"

Xavier was stringing a hammock between the big kapok tree and a smaller tree trunk several feet away. Without looking back, he said, "Hell if I know. It wasn't a tiger, wasn't a bear, and it wasn't a giant bird. Eli's an idiot."

"Hey," Eli said. "You can't prove that."

"But you can't dispute it, either," Gerald said.

"Anyways," Xavier continued, "I'm not sure. There are a lot of things that don't make sense about the ecosystem of this valley. These patches of dead and trampled forest have to be from some animals, but none that I know of could have ever done this much damage."

"The only thing I could say to explain it would be disease, but I highly doubt it, otherwise these spots in the forest would be more

widespread instead of so isolated.”

“Alright, Doc,” Gerald said. “So what attacked Ryan?”

“I’m getting to that,” Xavier said. “If something natural is killing these trees, like an animal, then we would have to assume that it’s either a swarm of insects or some sort of huge herbivore. The latter is the only way to explain the broken trees, as they seem too healthy and firm to have been rotting or diseased.

“So, if there is some sort of population of large animals eating these patches of forest, they have to have their population capped somehow. Something has to keep it in check or else they would have eaten everything in this valley by now.”

“And is that where our mystery predator comes in?” Gerald asked.

“Yessir,” Xavier said. “Something would have to hunt these herbivores, and it would have to be a particularly adept predator to kill something that would do this much damage to the forest. So what I’m thinking is that maybe we’ve come upon a very rare, very rich ecosystem supporting some as-of-yet discovered species of animal.

“And if that’s the case, then whatever attacked Ryan could be hunting the herbivores that destroyed these trees.”

“Which is exactly why this is a terrible place to camp, right?” Gerald asked.

Xavier grunted as he tightened the hammock’s straps around the kapok trunk. “I won’t question Ryan’s judgment, but I will say that he may need to think more clearly next time.”

“Ouch,” Eli said. He raised his flask. “Hey, let’s play a game! Every time Xavier says a big book-worm word, we take a drink. Xaves, recite everything you just said. I’m trying to get my buzz on.”

“Who’d you steal from this time?” Gerald laughed. “Jericho?”

“Even better; one of his black ops goons,” Eli said. He took a swig.

“Bourbon. Jim Beam. Kentucky style, just the way I like it.”

“You may want to hold off on that,” Miller said. “There’s no need to get drunk out here.”

“What, you don’t like to slug it out with Jim Bean?” Eli asked. He tilted his head back and took a swig. “Man, back in Kentucky, all I did as a kid was go hand to hand with Jim Beam. I’ve fought ‘im quite a few times, and he’s kicked my ass before.”

“Is that so?” Gerald grinned. “I heard he’s good at knocking your ass out.”

“Oh, hell yeah, he is,” Eli said. “And even if you win, you feel it the

morning after. Especially in your head. Feels like he kicked your goddamn lights out, half the time.”

“Cool it, Eli,” Miller said sternly. “You don’t need to be drinking tonight. If Ryan was here he’d be saying the same thing.”

“Yeah, well, you have your vice, and I have mine,” Eli replied. “I don’t need any goodie peabodies telling me what I can and can’t do. I want to drink, I’ll drink, I want to thump a bible, I’ll thump a fuckin’ bible.”

“Watch it, Eli!” Miller snapped.

“Woah, guys, relax!” Gerald said. “Save it for Charlie. What’s getting into you two?”

Miller and Eli glared at each other from across the tent. Miller’s eyes darted to the flask, so Eli pulled it away just as Miller grabbed for it.

Eli got to his feet and took a few step backs, holding the flask above his head. Miller stood up and slowly approached.

“Give me that flask, Eli,” Miller said. “You don’t need it.”

“Bullshit, I don’t need it,” Eli replied. “A guy’s gotta relax sometimes. You don’t have to get all judgmental and in my face about how I choose to unwind at the end of the day. *Christ.*”

Gerald stepped between them. “Guys, this is ridiculous,” he said.

“What’s ridiculous is thinking that booze can help you unwind,”

Miller said, staring at Eli. “Or let go of things. It doesn’t let you. It’s just a distraction; one we don’t need when there’s god-knows-what out here.”

“God-knows-what? God don’t know shit, god ain’t real,” Eli spat.

“I’m tired of hearing you talk about your imaginary friends all the time. For the past few months all you’ve been doing is putting your nose in a bible and talkin’ to yourself. What happened to sneaking out and picking up mama-sans in the cities? Gettin’ drunk and having a good time? You’re turning into a pansy, man!”

“Shut up, Eli!” Miller barked. “I’ll break your fuckin’ jaw if you say another word about my religion, you drunk prick!”

“Christians should act Christ-like,” Eli said, and he took a swig. “So play dead.”

Miller swung a fist at Eli, but Gerald got in the way and pushed him back. Eli went to grab Miller, and Xavier pulled him away. Eli and Miller yelled at each other over their friends’ shoulders, shouting obscenities. Xavier and Gerald tried to yell over them, merely adding to the chaos.

Logan stood off to the side, holding his head in his hands. He was trying to tune out the voices in his head, but they were becoming entwined with the shouting of his squad mates. He shook his head, his blood slowly rising to a boil, and he shouted, “*Stop it! Just shut up!*”

Everybody paused. They had never heard Logan raise his voice; not even in a fire-fight. Logan stared back at them and panted, his ears twitching to the voices of unseen phantoms.

“Just shut up,” he said. “You’re acting like kids.”

“We are a bunch of kids, smart-ass,” Eli said. “I’m only 23.”

“Shut up, Eli,” Miller grunted. He shrugged out of Gerald’s grasp.

“You’ve been acting like nothing but a jackass lately and it’s starting to piss me off. Grow up, for god’s sake.”

Miller walked away and ran his fingers through his cropped hair.

Eli scowled and jerked his arms away from Xavier. There was an awkward silence as the men returned to their tents.

Xavier slipped inside his hammock and sat with his M16A1 laid across his lap. A deep, rumbling growl rose in the distance. Xavier turned his head to the sky and listened closely, but didn’t speak. Logan and Gerald unrolled their sleeping bags, and beneath their breath, they talked about the voices.

Eli and Miller stood off to the side, their backs turned to the clearing, staring out into the surrounding forest. Miller remained silent, fingering the rosary that dangled from the ka-bar blade on his belt. Eli looked at his flask and rubbed a dime-sized indentation in its surface. They listened to the slow undulation of the river.

“This flask saved my life, you know,” Eli said. “Remember, on our first mission with Vulture Squad? We were running through huts and some gook popped around a corner and shot me. I thought I was dead, but ol’ grand pappy’s flask saved my life. Ryan even said if the flask wasn’t there, I would’ve died on the spot. Round would’ve hit my heart and everything.”

Miller rubbed his brow. “Eli, I can’t tell you how to live your life, but you have to learn how to let things go. We both remember what happened on the Han River. We can’t pretend it didn’t. I think it’s time we talked about it.”

“Whoa, who said anything about Han River?” Eli asked. He took a step back and raised his hands defensively. “I don’t know anything about Han River. I thought nothing happened, remember? We don’t have to talk about things that didn’t happen, man.”

"We have to face what we've done head on," Miller said. "I've been trying to come to terms with it. I've acknowledged my sins, and I've begged forgiveness. Even if you don't believe in God, we should at least talk about it, man to man. You've got to be going crazy with this shit on your shoulders."

Eli stared at Miller, his nostrils flaring.

"You know what, man? You can keep begging to your god for forgiveness, but I won't," Eli said. "I won't ask anybody's forgiveness, 'cause I don't need it. I'd like to put it behind me, but I can't exactly do that if you keep bringing it up, so leave it be."

"Eli-

"*Eli* doesn't give a shit!" Eli barked. Xavier glanced over, so Eli lowered his voice. "I don't give a shit. I don't want forgiveness; I want to forget. I want to get on with my life. You hear me? I don't...want...*to talk about it.*"

Miller frowned.

"Fine. But at least cut the drinking. You think I didn't see you drinking back in the jungle before Ryan got attacked, or when we were waiting to attack that POW camp? I'm not stupid. You have a problem, and you need to fix it."

"If I've got a problem, then you've got an even worse problem," Eli said, "Cause when you pray to god for forgiveness, you're talking to yourself. Ain't nobody listenin'. Nobody that matters, anyway."

Miller tightened his fists.

"At least I face my problems."

"Hey, I face my problems every time I look in the mirror," Eli said.

"All my problems will be over when I'm dead. You may think heaven will be waiting for you, but lemme tell you; I've seen what happens when you die.

"Remember when we were in Hue City, and I was going through buildings, and one of them collapsed on me? I was trapped. I could've been in a coffin."

"What about it?" Miller asked.

"Lemme tell you, I saw what death was like in that rubble. It's not dark; it's the absence of light. It's not cold; it's the absence of heat. It ain't quiet; it's the absence of sound, of life, of anything. There's nothing in death. There's only the silence and the mind floating around, in that darkness, until you fade away forever.

"That's what's waiting for you at the end of it all, when you're praying on your death bed. Not light, not god, not harps, just

silence. Silence is all that's ever waiting for you."

Eli stared at Miller with eyes of black marble.

"There's nothin'," Eli whispered. "Just silence."

Eli didn't blink, nor spoke. He brought the flask to his lips, took a long drink, and continued his unwavering gaze. Cicada buzzed like electricity from the tree tops. Miller felt a cold breeze on the nape of his neck, so he pulled his collar up and started towards their tent. When he passed Eli, he paused to look over his shoulder.

"You know, if you stop drinking and start thinking, you might feel something," Miller said.

Eli sat on the log and took another pull from the flask.

Miller shook his head in dismay and drifted past. Eli shut his eyes and cocked his head back, draining another shot. He drank until his throat tightened into a scorched knot. He pulled the flask away and let his head drop between his knees, gasping for air. The oxygen was incinerated in his mouth.

Warm drool ran down Eli's lip. He watched as a long strand of saliva bungeed from his chin and dripped onto a piece of dull ivory between his boots.

With a thoughtful grunt, he took the ivory and examined it in the pale moonlight. It was shaped like a banana, with dull serrations along its edges, and spider-web cracks caked with dried blood. It was a tooth.

CHAPTER ELEVEN - BLOODSHED

The jungle took on a nocturnal menace as Sergei and the Russians rushed to the sound of the Americans' firefight. Animals howled throughout the valley, birds cackled from the canopy, and insects hissed and chattered throughout the undergrowth. Sergei longed for the open skies of the floodplains, the moonlight reflected on the surface of primordial swamps. An anxious energy seeped from his bones, and his hard exterior began to unravel.

Sergei had longed for combat since he had seen the brutality of violence during the rigorous gauntlets of boot camp. He had been forced to crawl for hours through muddy trenches and barbed wire with a rifle in his hands and a bayonet between his teeth.

Some of Sergei's friends had died in those trenches, tangled in the barbed wire or shot in the head; the Spetsnaz instructors only used live ammunition. As traumatic as it had been to see his fellow countrymen die at the hands of their leaders, it made Sergei feel

stronger to know that he had survived. He thought he was ready for anything.

An icy current flowed through Sergei's veins. The contorted faces of his fallen friends, frozen mid-scream with blood leaking from their nostrils and slack jaws, stared from within. Sergei grunted and shook his head like a dog with a bad taste in its mouth. He was never able to get the images out of his head whenever they surfaced.

Even Sergei's memories of adolescence, of beating a bully's face until the boy's cheekbone was exposed like white marble, flashed through his mind. The guilt made him growl and bare his teeth like a beaten mutt.

There was something Sergei had read once, about how the life of man is short, brutish, and ugly. So far, Sergei's life had indeed been that. Poverty had made him angry and frustrated, and without an outlet for his aggression, he had always turned to violence. It was in his nature.

There was always the hope that he could channel that aggression into something good, like fighting for his country, but he often wondered if that was the right outlet. Tolstoy certainly seemed to think so, yet Sergei still thought of the faces of dead young men, and the desolate aggression of his youth.

As much as Sergei tried to remain cold and distant from his thoughts, they stirred something inside of him, a painfully fragile emotion that filled his core.

Further ahead, Sergei saw Tolstoy raise his fist and he crouched beneath a dark plume of ferns. Tolstoy plucked an object from the ground. A piece of brass reflected the moonlight between Tolstoy's thumb and finger- a bullet casing.

"It's still warm," Tolstoy whispered. He held it out for Sergei to see. "The Americans must have been here recently. Now we just need to find their trail and see where they went."

Tolstoy looked over his shoulder at Aleksandr and Nikita. "You hear that? Split up and find some footprints. Find their trail." Aleksandr and Nikita nodded and began to scour the forest floor for footprints. Sergei turned to leave, but Tolstoy grabbed his arm.

"Not you, Sergei. Stay close. For all we know, the Americans are still near. We need to be careful."

"I'm not scared of the Americans, sir," Sergei said. "They should be afraid of me."

Tolstoy smiled. "That's the spirit, comrade," he said. They bowed their heads to the ground and began creeping along the forest floor, carefully searching the leaf litter with their flashlights.

Further away, Aleksandr was walking alone through the shadows, his head raised to the dense understory canopy. He couldn't dispel a creeping sense of dread as he paced away from the rest of the group.

Despite his calm exterior, Aleksandr had been deeply troubled during their time in the jungle thus far. General Borodin and Viktor's secrecy had made him suspicious of their mission from the start, but Tolstoy wouldn't heed his warnings. He was too blinded by his patriotism to question their orders.

Nikita seemed to understand some of Aleksandr's concerns, but he wouldn't defend him when confronting Tolstoy. Aleksandr was starting to think he was losing time to warn the others. Their orders from Viktor had been vague, at best. Aleksandr wasn't sure what the Americans could be doing in the valley, or what they had been shooting at earlier. He didn't agree with Tolstoy's theory that the Americans were attempting to lure them closer with their sporadic gunshots.

If these men were the feared Special Forces that Viktor had warned them of, they wouldn't have been blindly shooting in the night to draw attention to themselves. They had to have been defending themselves.

Aleksandr wasn't sure what the Americans would have been fighting. He didn't think Con Nhen and his paltry Viet Cong guerillas would stand a chance. The Americans had to have been fighting something else, but Aleksandr had no idea what that something was.

In the back of his mind, he wondered if Viktor's secrecy had something to do with the Americans' attackers. He knew that there were Viet Cong in the valley, but he hadn't heard anything other than the Americans shouting and shooting. If they had indeed been attacked, it was done by something stealthy and silent.

The tall perimeter walls of Borodin's compound stuck out in Aleksandr's mind, but he couldn't tell why. If there was some sort of connection, he couldn't place it. He was frightened by his ignorance of the Vietnamese wildlife. How much did Viktor know about these jungles that he hadn't told them?

Aleksandr glanced over his shoulder and saw Sergei and Tolstoy fifteen yards away. Across the clearing, Aleksandr could see that Nikita had his back turned. Aleksandr felt the blood rush through his body, the lift of adrenaline.

A cool breeze carried the scent of decay. Aleksandr grimaced and tugged his collar up against the damp fingers of the wind. The silence of the forest was audible. He began to feel uncomfortable.

The off-putting silence had become more noticeable to Aleksandr as the night progressed. The chorus of nocturnal wildlife had descended to a few wary chirps and the rustling of the foliage.

Aleksandr's breath was light and impossibly loud. He swallowed back his anxiety. He watched the understory vegetation, as thick as topiary walls, from over the barrel of his rifle. The rest of the team was too far to be heard.

There was an unnatural quality to the sound of his breathing. It was resonant; low and rumbling. It seemed like a trick of the ear, the strange acoustics of the forest's cavernous depths. He tightened his hands around his rifle and held his breath.

The sound of breathing continued.

A rancid exhalation rushed through Aleksandr's hair. Aleksandr spun around and jaws clamped shut over his throat. Talons hooked into the flesh of his back and feathers cloaked his body. The AK-47 fell from his hands and hit the ground with a muffled *thump*.

A breathless rasp squeezed through his lips. His fists bounced like rubber off of the creature's skull. He pried at the jaws, but they were locked around his neck like a bear trap.

Serrated fangs sank into Aleksandr's throat. The claws spread fire as they split open the flesh of his back. His blood spilled onto the forest floor.

Aleksandr screamed mutely and gaped. The creature cradled him against its chest. He was repulsed by the furnace heat seeping through the animal's leathery flesh. Aleksandr thrashed and the creature dragged its talons down to the small of his back, scraping

the vertebrae.

The scream in Aleksandr's throat became the high-pitched whine of a mosquito. He stared into the creature's cold, unblinking eyes; it was like looking into the bottom of a deep well. His hands pulled at the thick plumage of its throat. He looked past the creature's snout and screamed silently. The canopy rushed overhead.

The creature was carrying him away.

"Where's Aleksandr?" Sergei asked, looking over his shoulder. Tolstoy turned and frowned. His flashlight swam over a sea of foliage like the beacon of a lighthouse. Nikita ran through the tunnel of light and waved a rifle over his head. His face was pale and strained with panic.

"Aleksandr's gone!" Nikita said. "I found his rifle-there's blood on it!"

Sergei's felt his stomach plummet. "How could Aleksandr just vanish?" he asked.

"Those damned Americans!" Tolstoy cursed. He shouldered past Nikita and swung the flashlight over the undergrowth. Blood shined burgundy on the top-side of some palm fronds. Tolstoy pointed and said, "Follow the blood and we'll find Aleksandr. We'll make the Americans pay."

They sprinted through the undergrowth, ducking beneath tree branches and low-hanging vines. Sergei struggled to keep up with Tolstoy and Nikita, who expertly weaved through the vegetation with little difficulty. Sergei's heartbeat was thunderous in his chest, and he was light-headed with adrenaline.

A hundred questions raced through his head, of how Aleksandr had vanished so quickly and how his captors were so capable of stealth. He knew that the American Special Forces were good, but they couldn't be this good, could they? The Spetsnaz were supposed to be the hunters on this mission, not the hunted. It was all wrong, and it terrified Sergei.

Tolstoy found blood dripping from the wide leaves of an elephant-ear plant. He planted his heel in the ground and made a sharp right. Nikita and Sergei both stumbled after Tolstoy. They ran through vegetation that reached over their heads.

Sergei swallowed nervously and pushed behind Nikita. He had the sudden sense of claustrophobia as the walls of foliage closed around him. He glanced at his feet and saw his reflection in moonlit blood. There were puddles of it, as well as what seemed to be two-

toed footprints pushed into the ground. They looked fresh. Sergei ran into Nikita, who had suddenly stopped. Banana trees and birds of paradise stood tall on either side of them. Sergei couldn't see past Nikita, but he could see the thick, cracked trunk of a durian tree looming ahead. Nikita pushed Sergei back. Sergei stood on the tips of his toes like an impatient child.

"What is it?" Sergei whispered. "What is Tolstoy looking at?" Nikita turned to face Sergei. His face was grim and bathed in shadow. His brow was knit tightly against his dark eyes. "Don't look," Nikita said. "Don't look."

"Bastards!" Tolstoy spat. "I'll rip their throats open with my bare hands!"

Sergei's heart dropped into his gut, and he pushed against Nikita.

"Let me see him," Sergei said urgently, "I have to see him! Where is he?"

Nikita tried to hold back Sergei, but Tolstoy said, "Let him see his comrade, Nikita. Let him see what the Americans have done to Aleksandr, what those sick, depraved bastards have done to our brother. These savages, these brutal psychopaths."

Sergei squeezed past Nikita and found Tolstoy kneeling at the base of the durian tree's sprawling roots, as if in prayer. The flashlight's beam shone on the blood splashed across the scratched tree bark. Sergei stopped mid-step and caught his breath. Aleksandr's corpse was rapidly and painfully etched into Sergei's mind as if by a dagger. Sergei gaped at Aleksandr's mangled, mutilated body, draped in wet crimson sheets of fresh blood. His head hung limp at an odd angle, the neck broken and ragged, blood flowing from it like a faucet.

The pale white bone of Aleksandr's neck vertebrae shined like porcelain in the flashlight's beam. Sergei felt himself slipping further into his body. Distance was created between his fragile young mind and the ravaged mess of the butchered corpse before him.

"Look at what those heathens have done to our brother," Tolstoy growled. "Look at it."

Nikita stepped closer. "Leave him alone, Tolstoy--"

"He needs to see!" Tolstoy barked. He turned to Sergei and pulled him face-to-face with Aleksandr's twisted mask.

"*Look at him*, Sergei! This is why we can never show mercy. The Americans are monsters. They will do this to you or me as quickly

as they did to him. Do not show them any mercy, and do not romanticize what this mission is; this is death. This isn't an adventure through an exotic land. This is murder."

Sergei tried to look away, but Tolstoy tightened his grip and forced him to face Aleksandr. Sergei's gaze fell onto Aleksandr, and he groaned timidly, a mixture of revulsion and fear. There was a long gash from the bottom of Aleksandr's sternum to the top of his pelvis, near the crotch. The gaping wound trailed severed bits of torn intestine like empty sausage skins. Sergei gagged.

"Do you see, comrade?" Tolstoy asked.

"They...they *emptied* him," Sergei choked.

"Just like they did to the Japanese in World War II, and just like they do to the Vietnamese now," Tolstoy said. "I've never seen an atrocity like this, but make no mistake, comrade - it's the last any of these Americans will ever make. We will find them, and we will make them suffer. That, I promise."

Sergei fell to his knees and vomited onto the soft forest floor. Tolstoy put his hand on Sergei's shoulder and they listened to the gradual return of the jungle's night-time songs. Nikita shook his head in disgust and turned away from them. Tolstoy helped Sergei to his feet.

"You have seen the worst of what's to come," Tolstoy said. "When we find the Americans, you must be able to kill without mercy. You have seen what they are capable of, and now you must find what you are capable of. What would you do to the Americans who did this?"

Sergei coughed and wiped the bile from his lips. Images of violence and gore flashed through his mind; of bullet-ridden young men tangled in barbed wire; bullies with broken noses and missing teeth; dead dogs shot on the side of the road.

Aleksandr's loss was fresh enough to incite pain, yet he found a strange comfort in his familiar faces of death. He exhaled through his clenched teeth.

"I will kill them," Sergei hissed. "I will kill them all!"

CHAPTER TWELVE – STALKED

Xavier struggled to keep his eyes open. The warm embrace of his hammock was an intoxicating pleasure in the cold, damp air. The rest of the squad was already asleep, bush-whacked from the long night of hiking. Xavier knuckled the grit from the corner of his eyes

and checked his watch; 4:45 AM. With a weary sigh, he sank further down into his hammock.

Tree frogs chirped and creaked from overhanging branches. Crickets played music from the grass. Xavier could feel himself falling to the peace of the moment, carried away by the river's soft ambient gurgle. He could feel himself sliding through the water, flowing over stones in shallow bends, drifting beneath a sunless sky to the distant horizon...

Xavier blinked. He checked his watch; 4:47. He distracted himself with thoughts of his childhood, where the forests of Maine had been his true home. His father had been a Cherokee; his mother was white. Xavier inherited his mother's skin, but he carried his father's heart. His father raised him to be a hunter.

Tracking was in Xavier's blood. He didn't care for school or sports; he dropped out when he was sixteen. He spent his adolescence in the mountains with his father, hunting and fishing, learning to find the most indecipherable animal tracks in the brush. His hunter's heart had led him to Vermont, where he lived off the grid in the green mountains until he turned eighteen, and eventually to Vietnam, to serve his fellow soldiers as a guide and a medic in the deadliest jungle in the world.

Xavier had carried his hunter's heart through Vietnam. While most men were terrified of Vietnam's elusive wilderness, Xavier was enthralled. He knew his placement in the jungle; he always understood that he was both a predator and prey. He affirmed his rightful place at the top of the food chain with memories of hunting deer with a home-made bow and arrow, killing black bear with rifles, catching fox and rabbits with make-shift traps.

Xavier's encounters with Vietnamese wildlife had reminded him of his peers at the top of the food chain. He had seen men taken in the night by tigers, or dragged away by crocodiles while crossing streams.

Xavier ran his fingers through his black mane of hair and exhaled. He couldn't imagine a worse death than being eaten alive. He knew that there would be no salvation from an animal attack; claws would snap through his tendons, fangs would shear off his flesh, and his bones would be crushed like chalk between grinding jaws.

During sleepless nights, Xavier often fantasized of dying beneath a hungry tiger. His affirmation of being a fellow predator helped to alleviate these fears, but he always had nightmares. He could still

hear the gurgling choke of his old squad mate, Cacciato, as a tiger sliced his throat open with its incisors. He could envision a similar death for himself in vibrant clarity.

Xavier chewed his beard. He didn't voice his opinions, but he believed Ryan had made a grave mistake in setting up camp so soon after his attack. Xavier understood that most predators had large territories; a single tiger could have a territory several miles wide. If they had continued for a few more hours, they may have left the territory of Ryan's attacker. Now they were sitting ducks; an open feast. Xavier squeezed the barrel of his rifle.

Xavier felt a sibling rivalry with Ryan. They were the same age, and had been in the military for the same amount of time. Xavier knew Ryan was only captain because he was the last surviving member of his original outfit, but it was unfair. Xavier wanted his chance to lead.

In his mind's eye, he was a guide in the jungle, a native expert, a hunter and tracker. He could lead the squad through the most hostile environments just as his father had led him through the mountains of Maine. Xavier understood the wilderness; Ryan did not. Xavier knew that they were little more than defenseless apes with rifles.

If Xavier were in charge, he wouldn't have to keep his eyes open for fear of some unknown beast stalking them in the night.

Christ, get it together, Xavier thought.

He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck bristling. He smoothed them down and held his rifle. He sat upright, scanning the surrounding forest. His eyes adjusted so that he could see the moonlight that seeped through the canopy, settling in the open space between the undergrowth and the tree tops. A phantom mist hung in the air. The sounds of the jungle had gradually dwindled away. The rest of the squad was snoring in their tents. Xavier envied them.

Xavier checked his watch; 4:50. It was amazing how time could play tricks on the mind. In a matter of hours, the sun would rise and they would be safe from further predation. Xavier rubbed his temples; he would be lucky to get any sleep by then.

Xavier paused, raising his head to face the forest.

The jungle was silent.

Xavier lifted his rifle and peered at the mist that lingered in the forest beyond. The longer he stared, the more shapes materialized

in the blurry dark. He could faintly detect the moonlight illuminating the space between the trees, giving depth to the flat image of his surroundings.

He suddenly felt exposed. The clearing they were camped in was much too open to attack. The pillars of dead trees made it difficult for him to see, and he began to feel angry with Ryan for choosing such a poor camp site.

Xavier faced forward and bolted upright.

Yellow eyes stared back at him from the forest.

Xavier didn't move, didn't breathe; he didn't even think. Fresh sweat dampened his clothes. He was transfixed by the cold stare of the amber eyes. At first he thought that they might have belonged to a tiger, but then he watched the eyes climb higher, into the tree tops. Xavier knew that tigers rarely climbed trees, but a bear would.

Xavier would have been content with this theory- a bear wouldn't be so bad-but then he saw another pair of eyes blink open to his left.

The M16A1 shook in his hands.

Another pair of eyes shone from another tree trunk, thirty feet off the ground.

Half a dozen eyes watched him from the darkness.

Xavier tried to remain calm despite his rapid-fire heartbeat. His eyes jumped around the clearing, from one set of eyes to another. The creatures remained in the shadow just beyond the light of the open canopy.

Xavier tried to think clearly, but he couldn't; all of his senses were stuck in the enhanced vividness of fight or flight. He could hear the animals sniffing the air like dogs. The M16A1 was forgotten in his hands. Now it was the same as a crucifix, a symbol to repel evil and keep some sense of sanity in his mind. Thoughts began to appear in overdrive.

Are these creatures pack hunters? Are they simply coming together for a feeding frenzy? What are they? How big are they? How fast are they?

Am I going to die?

Claws skittered across the tree bark above Xavier's head, and splinters rained onto his hammock. All of Xavier's thoughts left him at once. His head slowly tilted back and he stared up into the eyes of a creature ten feet above him.

The creature's body was outlined in stars; its body was the size of a wolf, with a thick coat of shining iridescent feathers, and a long

snout filled with glistening fangs. It held onto the tree with a pair of wing-like forearms, and its long tail stood up straight like a flag. Xavier was paralyzed. A whimper choked in his throat. The creature's tail flicked back and forth with the cold excitement of a cat.

I'm going to die, Xavier thought.

His head fell forward, and he saw several more creatures emerge from the undergrowth. They purred as they approached, their heads bobbing like herons as they moved. Their glowing eyes drifted through the darkness. A few of the creatures sniffed the tents, baring their teeth.

Xavier wanted to scream and wake up the others, but he knew this would only incite a bloodbath. He somehow knew that the creatures would be triggered by his screams.

There was no escape; they were surrounded.

One of the creatures suddenly lifted its head and snorted furiously. It hissed lowly, like a burst of steam, and the other creatures stopped. They stood on their hind legs, tucked their arms against their sides, and sniffed the air. One of the creatures chuffed, and the animal above Xavier growled.

Xavier could see they were tense; they hopped around on their back legs, glancing at the jungle with jerking movements of their heads. Then, as quickly as they had appeared, they scrambled up the surrounding trees and leapt away, from trunk to trunk, creating a roar of shaking leaves as they went. Xavier watched the tree tops until they became still and vacant. He was stunned.

Somewhere in the far off jungle, there was a powerful *thump*, and the ground shook.

Xavier jerked his head back up. His hammock swayed between the shivering trees. There was a second *thump*, like a tree had fallen, and the ground shook again. A flock of birds exploded from the distant tree tops and spiraled upward, like a flurry of shadows swirling across the pale face of the moon. It seemed like a giant mallet was striking the earth, making it rumble and shake, more powerful with each successive impact.

They were footsteps, and they were getting closer.

Xavier fell out of his hammock and scrambled on his hands and knees to the closest tent. He grabbed the fabric and shook it wildly.

“Eli, Miller, wake up!” Xavier hissed, “Let me in! Wake up!”

“Mmyeah mama-san, more syrup,” Eli grumbled.

“*Wake up, Eli, you stupid bastard!*” Xavier growled.

The muffled footfalls reverberated through Xavier’s bones, and he could hear the trees creaking as they bent away from a powerful force. The footsteps sounded like landmines exploding beneath the soil. He was amazed that the others were able to sleep at all. Xavier scrambled to the other side of the tent and tried to unzip it, but the zipper kept slipping out of his jittery, sweating fingers. The ground stopped rumbling, and the trees swayed at the edge of the clearing.

Xavier laid down in the shadow of the tent. Something was breathing heavily from just beyond the stand of trees. It sounded like wind rushing through a cave. Xavier peered around the corner of the tent and caught his breath when he saw the behemoth beyond the campsite.

The silhouette of a twenty-foot tall leviathan slowly circled the clearing. Each methodic footstep made the forest shake. Xavier felt his mind retract into a primordial lizard-brain, one of only sensation and reaction. He couldn’t comprehend what he was seeing.

“What the fuck, Xavier?” Eli mumbled.

Shut up, Eli, Xavier silently prayed.

The footsteps stopped and the behemoth hesitated. Xavier held his breath; maybe it hadn’t heard Eli. The air shifted towards Xavier, so they were downwind of the beast. It couldn’t smell them, but Xavier was struck by a wave of stench thick with decay, rot, and spilt blood. He choked back bile.

If they were downwind, they might be safe. Xavier couldn’t conjure anything other than hope that they were safe. All other thoughts had left him.

The behemoth pushed its snout through the canopy and into the clearing. Its blood-stained maw hovered high above the forest floor. Stripes of moonlight were painted across its leathery skin. The jaws were big enough to swallow a man whole, and the teeth were like serrated blades. Xavier recognized an elephant’s leg in the creature’s jaws, a ragged cigar of flesh and broken bone.

The behemoth’s dull, reptilian eyes rolled across the tents. Xavier

shrank away from the black eyes and listened to the beast sniff the air. Its powerful chest chugged with each breath like a mighty engine.

With each huffing snort, Xavier flinched closer the tent. He wished he had his M16A1, but even if he did, it wouldn't make a difference. The creature was as big as a tank; even Leon's rocket launcher would be useless against it.

Somebody stirred inside the tent, and the creature growled lowly. The air trembled around Xavier, and his sphincter tightened. He peeked around the tent and saw the creature standing half-way in the clearing.

A scream rose in Xavier's throat, a knee-jerk reaction, but he smothered it behind his hands. He couldn't believe his eyes; there was no way the creature could be real, but there it was. He had seen it a million times before, but not like this. Never in real life. Never alive.

The behemoth lifted its head and sniffed the air again. Nostrils flexed open and closed on the bulbous end of its snout. A deep growl rumbled in the creature's chest, and the tree tops shivered. The creature pulled its head back inside of the jungle and it turned away, into the depths of the forest.

Xavier watched in silence as the behemoth moved through the jungle, as agile as a bird, away and into the darkness. The footsteps gave way to silence.

After a few minutes, the jungle returned to life. Xavier listened to the nocturnal animals, *familiar* animals, and he exhaled. His eyes glared white and his entire body was shaking. He sat upright and looked around; there weren't any glowing eyes or towering monsters.

A terrible realization dawned on him.
The behemoth was heading towards Ryan and Leon.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – THE BEHEMOTH

Ryan and Leon stood at the precipice of a game trail that carved downhill through impenetrable bamboo forest. The tallest beams of bamboo arced over the trail, creating a net that prevented any moonlight from touching the forest floor.

The flashlight attached to Ryan's rifle skimmed over the decaying layers of splintered bamboo that covered the path. The beam of the flashlight couldn't reach further than a few feet down the trail.

Ryan stared at Leon. He could hear his nervous respirations. "No way," Leon whispered. "There's no way I'm going down there." "Come on, Leon. We need to see what this leads to," Ryan said. "For all we know, it could bring us closer to the answers we're looking for."

"Like what?" Leon asked. "Whatever attacked you, or whatever made the other trails, or what happened to the Green Beret? Do you really think we should be looking for any of those things by ourselves, just the two of us?"

Ryan glared at the shade that lingered beyond the reach of his flashlight. It was like trying to peer through a black oil painting. Mist glittered across the crushed bamboo floor of the trail. Ryan knew it wasn't wise to lead a rookie down such a forbidding path, but he needed answers. If he was going to protect his squad from the danger that surrounded them in this valley, he had to face it head on. He couldn't drag them through the mission in ignorance. They couldn't be left in the dark any longer.

"It'll only take a minute," Ryan said. "We're just going to see what this path leads to, and then we'll head back. I just don't want to go any longer without knowing what we're dealing with. It isn't fair to any of us; we deserve to know."

"Jericho wouldn't hide anything, right?" Leon asked. "You know, all that crazy stuff Gerald talked about on the helicopter? Do you think that could be true?"

"He's absolutely hiding something from us," Ryan muttered. "He's done it before, and he'll do it again. If we want answers, we'll have to find them ourselves. Come on; this will only take a minute."

Ryan raised his CAR-15 and walked over the lip of the hill. The descent was steep, and the bamboo was slick with rainwater and rot. The beam of the flashlight led them like a will o' the wisp drifting through the bottom of a cave.

Ryan angled the flashlight to the side and the beam scattered across countless stilts of bamboo, into oblivion. The ground beneath the green stalks was barren of life, deprived of precious sunlight. He couldn't see further than ten feet into the maze of poles.

"Shit," Leon said begrudgingly, following Ryan. "This is nuts."

For all Ryan knew, the bamboo stretched for miles toward the river's edge. If they got lost in the forest, they could very well never be found. Ryan had heard of men dying this way; they would walk ten feet away from their teammates to go to the bathroom and

never be seen again.

Men had different phantoms to explain these disappearances; Viet Cong, animals, demons of the night. Usually it was a man's own mistake that led him to death. Ryan had learned that the hard way. Ryan rubbed the gnarled flesh beneath his mask. He had seen many men die because of simple mistakes, from picking the wrong spot for cover in a fire-fight to releasing a grenade too late. If he made a mistake while leading his men, he could get them killed in ways that could have been avoided. He knew in his heart that he was looking out for the best interest of his squad, but he couldn't always be right.

Ryan longed for the days when he didn't have to dread over his mistakes. There was a time in his life when he was sanctioned to a hospital bed in Japan, and his days consisted of watching a bustling city street through a haze of morphine. During that idyllic time, he had drifted through his body like a ghost haunting the halls of a mausoleum.

There was no pain, no emotions, thoughts or regret; just pure, ethereal bliss. Those days were long gone, and as much as Ryan wished he could return to them, he never could. His only return to bliss would be in escape, and that day had yet to come.

Ryan scratched a scarred vein on his inner arm and looked at the canopy. The bamboo tilted away from the hill to create a cascading waterfall of fog-bathed foliage. Some of the creaking poles were so tall that they completely escaped the reach of Ryan's flashlight.

In such a vast bamboo forest, he expected to hear some birds or other animals, but he was only greeted by the rise and fall of the river's rushing breath. Hollowed poles rolled beneath his feet and clattered downhill. Leon grunted and stumbled. Ryan shined the light at Leon's feet and paused.

An ivory tusk gleamed under Leon's boot.

Leon shouldered his rifle and held the tusk in both hands. Dried blood flaked from its scratched surface. Leon ran his thumb over pock-marked indentations.

"What the hell could do that to an elephant?" Ryan asked.

"Probably the same thing that created this path," Leon said. He became apprehensive; he glanced at the surrounding forest. "I don't like this, Ryan. This is bad. We shouldn't be here."

Ryan felt the fear in Leon's voice like a knife twisting through his gut.

“We’ll be fine. Just a little further and we’ll head back.”

Leon appeared sullen and uncertain, but he nodded and continued to follow Ryan. As they walked, Ryan vaguely wondered how far he was willing to drag Leon into the darkness. He needed Leon to be strong and follow him into the abyss if they were going to help the others. Ryan convinced himself he was doing the right thing, but the fear that radiated from Leon made him think otherwise. They were nearing the bottom of the hill; it would all be over soon. Ryan followed the flashlight’s crawling beam and saw countless bones mixed into the bamboo carpet. Some were yellow and brittle with age, crunching beneath their boots; others were fresh, with grayed gristle clinging to the balls and joints. The path leveled out, and they heard the river louder than before. It seemed unnatural, the way it pulsed slowly in the air like blood through an artery.

At the end of the trail they entered a palatial glade penned in by towering bamboo. The sharp stench of acid singed their nostrils. Ryan adjusted his mask, grimacing.

“What the hell is that?” Ryan whispered. “It smells like a bird cage.”

“Uric acid,” Leon said. “It’s what makes bird-shit white.”

Ryan thought of the feathers Eli and Miller found, the footprints in the field, and the plumage of his attacker. Mental cogs clicked in place. He hesitated.

“Why don’t we come back tomorrow with the rest of the squad?” Leon asked. “It’ll be safer that way.”

“No, we’re getting to the bottom of this *now*,” Ryan said. He squeezed his CAR-15 and aimed the flashlight at the ground a few feet ahead.

They walked across the clearing, listening to the rising respiration of the river. The smell of feces and rot became unbearable to the point that Leon choked, and Ryan’s eyes watered. Ryan heard a faint scratching sound, like claws scraping rock, and a hiccupping chirp.

Ryan narrowed his eyes and ground his teeth. His heart was pounding hard and fast. He scanned the earth with his flashlight back and forth, back and forth, until he found a four-foot-high ridge of packed mud.

Ryan paused. He shined the light down both sides of the wall; it stretched twenty feet in either direction and curved into darkness. It was an immense ring. A blanket of soft ferns and shimmering black

feathers covered its surface.

Ryan plucked one of the feathers and turned it over in the light; it shined from jet black to iridescent green. It was different from the feathers that they had found in the field, and it didn't feel like the plumage of the creature that had attacked him the night before.

A sudden gust of wind surged through the clearing, loud like it went through a tunnel. Ryan looked at Leon but his face was masked in the darkness. Another gust pulsed through the clearing, carrying waves of noxious odors. Ryan turned on his heel and pointed the rifle's flashlight at the ring of dirt.

The flashlight's beam climbed over the lip of the mound and illuminated a boulder. The rock's surface glistened darkly like rain-washed slate. Dull emerald stripes, possibly lichen, were painted across its surface. It was a beautiful rock, but Ryan was confused how it had entered this patch of forest. For a second, he wondered if it had been a meteorite that crashed into the jungle, or if it had rolled down the hill to its current location. That would have explained the path that led through the bamboo....

The boulder suddenly expanded with the roar of surging wind. Ryan recoiled in shock, aiming his rifle at the wall. The boulder contracted tightly, and coiled muscles bulged beneath the rock's surface as it exhaled.

Ryan's stomach plummeted.

He was staring at the body of an enormous animal.

The flash-light's beam danced across the beast's side from Ryan's shaking hands. He was dumbstruck; any investigative thoughts left him at once. Right now, all he wanted to do was run away and never look back. He could run until he was out of the jungle, out of the valley, and out of his mind. He was overwhelmed by panic; his urge to flee reduced him to a quaking mess.

Ryan had been chased by mortar fire and confronted with the most gruesome of human nature, but he had never been afraid like this. Never.

"It's asleep," Leon whispered.

Ryan heard the creature's lethargic respiration rumble in its chest. It was, indeed, asleep. Ryan took a cautious step forward and ran the flashlight along the length of the creature.

The animal was curled in the fetal position with its back turned to them. To the left, the creature's thick tail curled away from them, and to the right, its head was tucked out of sight. It was easily forty

feet long and powerfully muscled. Dull brown feathers covered the creature's thick neck like fur. Every fiber in Ryan's body screamed for him to leave.

A curious chirping nailed Ryan's feet in place.

A pair of small creatures raised their heads above the ridge of mud. They were covered in a fluffy down like their mother, and their short snouts were filled with teeth like needles. One of the animals cocked its head at Ryan and chirped.

Ryan looked at Leon with a mixture of shock and confusion. The baby chirped again and stared with black doe eyes. The chirping turned shrill and demanding. Leon's eyes shone wide, and he pulled Ryan away, covering the flashlight with one hand and Ryan's mouth with the other.

A deep rumbling growl rose from the sleeping Mother. The steady breathing halted, and a pair of ghostly eyes flickered in the darkness. Ryan and Leon remained frozen. They could hear the huge bulk of the beast shifting in its nest.

Ryan trembled violently; this couldn't be real. None of it could be real. These animals couldn't be real, and those eyes couldn't be rising twenty feet in the darkness. He was in a state of pure shock; he could feel the fabric of his mind being torn asunder.

Leon tugged on Ryan's arm, and they broke into a desperate sprint. The air was broken by a sudden and explosive roar that knocked them both to the ground. Ryan pulled Leon upright, and they ran blindly across the clearing.

The Mother's feet pounded the earth like falling trees. The clearing shook beneath their feet. Ryan and Leon hit the trailhead and groped blindly for purchase. Their hands skimmed wet bones and bamboo. Ryan had found the bottom of the abyss, he had dragged Leon with him, and now they were fleeing its depths like suffocating divers. He could only pray they reached the surface in time.

Ryan and Leon scrambled up the steep incline on their hands and knees. The floor constantly rolled out from beneath them and they kept falling face-down. Leon slid behind Ryan and screamed for help. The Mother bellowed in response from several dozen feet below. They only saw her eyes glowing in the dark like grey marbles.

Ryan groped backwards until he found Leon's arm and dragged him back up. They clawed at the ground, grabbed the living

bamboo poles for support, and pulled themselves to their feet. The trail seemed endless. Ryan's hands were slashed by splinters of wood as sharp as blades. Leon choked and cried behind him. The Mother closed the distance with ease, her presence represented by the increasing quaking of the world around them. Ryan heard Leon scream something indecipherable, a pure release of terror.

The Mother's footsteps made the ground shake and slide beneath them. Ryan and Leon dragged themselves through a waterfall of bone and bamboo shrapnel, their jaws clenched, screams rising in their throats.

Moonlight flickered through the tree tops at the top of the hill. Ryan felt a surge of adrenaline, and he pulled himself back up. Leon saw the top as well, and he started to sprint alongside Ryan. The air burned in their lungs and the forest swayed around them. A gust of hot breath brushed their backs. The Mother roared so close that Ryan could feel the sound shred through his ear drums. In a matter of steps, she would have him in her jaws.

The chicks squealed from the bottom of the hill. The footsteps suddenly faltered and fell away. The Mother released a final guttural roar and the forest descended to silence.

Ryan saw the mouth of the jungle twenty feet away, then fifteen, ten, until he collapsed at the top of the trail with Leon. They scrambled away like dogs and dove for cover. They waited for the Mother to charge out after them, but nothing happened. They could hear her slowly trudging downhill to her nest.

Ryan and Leon remained on the ground for a minute, panting and wide-eyed. Finally, Leon laughed, and soon Ryan began to laugh as well. They were laughing from hysteria, out of pure disbelief that they had survived. Ryan had a million questions, but all that mattered was that they were alive. When they got back to the squad, they would radio Jericho and report what they had seen, and they would get the hell out of the valley.

There was no way Ryan would lead his squad through this jungle anymore; the world no longer made sense. All that mattered was that they were going home.

A low, resonant growl pulled Ryan out of his thoughts. He slowly lifted his head and saw gargantuan, reptilian feet gripping the earth with black talons. His eyes crawled up the muscular legs like tree trunks, up to the massive heaving chest and short arms with two-fingered claws, to the thick musculature of the neck. Moonlight

shone on a majestic mane of feathers shining like shards of obsidian.

Ryan looked higher and he saw the behemoth's head twenty feet in the air. The rectangular jaws opened and closed, tasting the air, and the knife-blade teeth dripped red with blood. The nostrils on the end of its snout flared open with a rumbling snort, and its beady black eyes stared into Ryan's.

The father Tyrannosaurus Rex growled and took a step forward.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN – OVER THE EDGE

“Fucking *dinosaurs*!”

Xavier paced furiously across the campsite as the others gathered their equipment. Logan and Gerald stood at the edge of the clearing while Miller and Eli shouldered their rucksacks. Eli sluggishly rubbed his temples and sat on his haunches. Sweat dripped from his dangling curls of hair. The sunlight chewed through the canopy, making the air broil hot and thick. It was a prelude of the unbearably humid day to come. Miller glanced at Xavier and raised an eyebrow.

“Seriously, Xavier? Dinosaurs?”

“I’m serious!” Xavier spat. “I know what I saw; a pack of small dinosaurs outside the campsite, and then one really big one chased them all away. I think it was a T. rex or something. Come on, you all heard those sounds in the distance! That wasn’t thunder!”

Miller crossed his arms, rolling his eyes. “I just can’t believe it, Xavier. I know how it is keeping watch. Your eyes play tricks on you and you see things that aren’t there. Hell, it could drive anybody mad--”

“I’m not crazy!” Xavier shouted. “Listen, it explains everything; the

thing that attacked Ryan was a species of dinosaur, the game trails we saw from the helicopter were created by some sort of herbivores, and hell, the clearing we're standing in now was probably created by them! I bet they eat whole swaths of forest at a time!"

"I found a tooth last night," Eli said. He held it up for Xavier to see.

"Take a look. It could be from that Rex or whatever, if it's true."

"You can't be serious, Eli," Miller said, shaking his head. "There's gotta be a logical explanation. There's no way there are dinosaurs in this valley. No way. I mean, there's some weird shit going on here, but it's not because of dinosaurs. That's some stupid science-fiction pulp-magazine talk."

Gerald bounced eagerly on his heels. "Come on, all this talk and only one thing matters; Ryan and Leon are missing. We need to go find 'em and see what's going on."

A roar like blasting napalm reverberated through the jungle. The entire ecosystem shrieked in response. Birds burst through the canopy and spiraled through a reddening sky as shadowy fragments. Gerald and Logan went rigid and Eli jumped to his feet. Miller looked uncertainly at Xavier and gripped his M16A1. Frantic, high pitched screams drifted from the forest.

"Ryan and Leon," Xavier said.

They briefly hesitated, then sprinted into the jungle.

The world blurred around Ryan as he charged mindlessly through an endless expanse of bamboo. Leon screamed behind him, and the Father T. rex bellowed tremendously.

The mighty behemoth crashed through the jungle behind them. Bamboo cracked and crunched beneath its bulk. Thick reeds fell and struck the ground around Ryan like whipping rods. Damp breath rushed over his back and he screamed out of pure terror.

Ryan opened his eyes, and a branch swung for his face. He ducked, rolled beneath the branch, and scrambled to his feet. Leon shoved him forward and the T. rex crunched a mouthful of reeds where they had been.

Ryan refused to look back, but he could still sense the dinosaur's presence. The forest rocked with each ballistic step. The beast roared and copper-scented spit sprayed across the back of his neck.

The canopy rolled in turbulent waves as animals scurried away from the T. rex's swinging head and snapping jaws. Hundreds of

animals were squawking and screaming, tearing apart the tree tops as they fled. It was deafening. Ryan was overwhelmed by the chaos, thoughtless in his instinctual flight.

There was no hiding, nor fighting; running was their only option. Ryan and Leon were lost in the forest, veering far away from where their campsite had been. The ground sloped downhill toward the sound of the river. Ryan and Leon hopped across the dips in the earth as the T. rex pushed through the clattering rods of bamboo.

Ryan looked over his shoulder and saw the T. rex falling behind; it walked slowly downhill, as if it were afraid of twisting an ankle. Ryan was sure that if such a huge beast fell, there would be no saving it.

“Hurry, keep going downhill!” Ryan shouted. “Head for the river!”

“Can it swim?” Leon cried.

“Doesn’t matter, just keep running!”

Ryan shoved his way around the bamboo and bounded downhill. Gaining momentum, he leapt and hit the pillars of bamboo, swinging around, leaping off again. His vision pulsed with his throbbing heartbeat. The taste of copper was fresh in his mouth. Blood dripped from the dozens of scrapes and cuts that covered his face and forearms. He was intoxicated with his adrenaline.

He had never run so hard in his life, not since he escaped a hail of mortar fire in the jungles with Captain McNeil. He remembered the ground exploding around him; the trees collapsing; the fire and smoke that filled the air. The pain of the memory stung in Ryan’s gut, but this was worse. Infinitely worse.

The rising humidity smothered Ryan and Leon like wet cloth. Their legs bowed. They had been running for what seemed like hours, and their bodies were failing them. Ryan finally glanced over his shoulder and saw the T. rex weaving downhill in a serpentine pattern.

Even from sixty feet away, the tyrannosaurus looked large enough to swallow the sun. Ryan choked back a scream, and he stumbled. Leon ran into him and they both went rolling downhill, bouncing across the low rises and lumps of the earth.

Rocks scraped Ryan’s sides and cracked against his joints. Bamboo shoots sliced through his clothes. He grabbed for purchase, clawed through the soft soil, and got kicked in the head by Leon’s flailing boot. The lights switched off in Ryan’s head.

When Ryan opened his eyes a few seconds later, he was airborne.

He screamed and caught a thick column of bamboo to the gut, stopping his flight. He slid down the length of bamboo and dropped into a ditch filled with ferns. Pain flooded his body.

Ryan groaned and pushed himself upright. He looked uphill and saw Leon's face twisted in a scream, rushing towards him. Leon crashed into Ryan, and they slammed into the ditch. Coughing and groaning, they pulled themselves back up into a sitting position. Further uphill, the T. rex was working its way around a final switchback towards them. It walked slowly, sniffing the air. Its muscular body was covered in deep green leather, with the black ringlets of a leopard covering its flank.

A shaggy coat of iridescent green feathers covered the behemoth's back, wrapped around its throat in a mane, and created a sharp crest on the back of its skull. The huge head craned back and forth, its dark eyes scanning the forest floor.

Leon shivered violently behind Ryan and moaned. Ryan clasped his hand over Leon's mouth and pulled him back beneath the ferns. The footsteps faltered. A baritone growl trembled through the earth like a thousand bass strings were being plucked at once. Leon seized up in Ryan's grasp. Their faces were close together; Ryan could see Leon's huge eyes tearing up.

The look in Leon's eyes was the same as Ryan's when he had gone on his first mission with Vulture Squad. A thousand yard stare; he was in shell shock. His mind was undoubtedly mute, a hollow skull full of screaming, overwhelming fear. Ryan tried to whisper a reassuring "Shhh," but it came out like a spastic hiss. His jaw was locked shut.

The jungle was silent. The T. rex steadily walked along the base of the hill. In the distance, the Mother T. rex growled like an approaching thunderstorm. Chirps poked the open air. Ryan thought the Father T. rex might return to its nest, but then a wide three-toed foot gripped the edge of the ditch beside him.

Ryan glanced sideways and saw scaled talons, like those of an ostrich, inches away from his head. He looked up through the gaps in the ferns and saw the pale underside of the T. rex's huge set of jaws.

The Father T. rex twitched its head in the direction of snapping branches. The eyes were bright and intelligent; very birdlike. The veins that were threaded through its neck pulsed as it inhaled. A thick strand of saliva dangled from its jaws and snapped off,

smacking the ferns heavily above Ryan and Leon.

Leon seized violently. Ryan struggled to keep him still. The T. rex lowered its head and barked like an artillery gun. The sound was so forceful that it physically struck them both. The T. rex snorted heavily and swung its head back and forth. It barked again, short and brisk. It was then that Ryan realized what was happening; the T. Rex had lost them, so it was trying to scare them out of hiding.

They could remain hidden and wait the predator out, but how long would that take? The need to run was too great; Ryan was having trouble staying still in the ditch. His adrenaline urged him to flee.

Ryan could hear the river gurgling beneath the dinosaur's barks and grunts. He was sure that he was hearing it and not another dinosaur; he wouldn't make that mistake twice. Gauging the river's distance was impossible, but he knew that if he could find it, they could get away.

It was a dangerous gambit; either hide and wait out the T. rex or make a run for it. For all Ryan knew, the river could be a mile away. However, the T. rex could find them any second now. He whispered the plan to Leon; on the count of three, they would sprint for the river.

The T. rex took another step forward. Ryan stared at the smooth underbelly between the behemoth's legs. He held his fingers in front of Leon's face and whispered the words to himself.

One...

Two...

Ryan couldn't will himself to lower the third finger. The tension was coiling his muscles so tight that he thought they might burst. His hand trembled from the surging adrenaline. The air in his lungs felt like helium that would make him float away. He knew the T. rex could outpace them. They had to move *now*.

Get up, Ryan! Go, you dumb bastard, go! Go!

Three!

Ryan and Leon scrambled out of the ditch between the T. rex's tree trunk legs and ran beneath its thick, swinging tail. The T. rex turned, and its tail smashed through the bamboo like brittle sticks.

Ryan and Leon ducked from the raining splinters. They pumped their arms and kicked through the foliage that grew at the edge of the bamboo forest, sprinting towards the river. Ryan felt a burst of hope; they were going to make it!

The T. rex roared with seismic force as it barreled after them through the forest. The dense expanse of bamboo gave way to an open forest floor, and the behemoth was no longer inhibited amongst the sparse banyan trees. Ryan glanced over his shoulder and saw the Rex closing the distance with ease. In a matter of steps, it would have them in its jaws.

Ryan looked ahead and saw the end of the forest floor a few meters beyond a stand of trees. He planted his heel in the ground and staggered to a stop at the edge of a sun-bathed cliff face.

Leon stumbled beside him and looked down. The river rushed nearly sixty feet below. The opposite river bank was a waning moon of white sand surrounded by mangroves.

“We have to jump!” Ryan shouted.

Leon hesitated. They heard the ferocious howl of the tyrannosaurus and turned to see it smash through the trees at the end of the forest. Its jaws were spread wide, teeth glinting in the sunlight.

Leon yelped and leapt off the cliff. Ryan dove after him and screamed as gravity wrenched him down. He caught a glimpse of the sky as he fell; scorched burgundy and charcoal clouds, with an intense yellow sun climbing above the mountains.

It was then that Ryan saw the tyrannosaurus had lost its footing and was falling in after them.

Ryan screamed and knifed into the icy water with a frothy splash. He plummeted like a stone and slowly bobbed to the surface. Ryan broke through the muffled silence of the water and heard the sharp scream of the T. rex. A shadow fell over the river and the T. rex crashed in with the force of a falling boulder. The river surged and Ryan was dragged underwater towards the thrashing behemoth. The current pulled Ryan into a whirlpool around the T. rex’s swinging skull. Ryan kicked, and the T. rex caught him with electric eyes. It snapped at him, cracking its jaws shut just as Ryan was dragged beneath the waves. The world turned muffled and dark. Ryan’s eyes opened to see the T. rex’s miniscule forearms slashing feebly.

The tyrannosaurus’s head burst beneath the waves and its jaws slammed shut a foot away from Ryan. Bubbles jetted from between its teeth. The force rolled Ryan backwards and he caught a glimpse of Leon sinking beneath the tyrannosaurus’s kicking legs. He wasn’t moving.

Ryan kicked to the surface and gasped for air. The mask

suffocated him; he dragged it down to his throat. With his lungs refilled to the brim, he dove back down and swam towards Leon. The T. rex snapped at his feet, and he was pushed further down. He spun in the water and propelled himself to the bottom. The T. rex's kicking created powerful waves that pushed Leon against the river's muddy floor. Ryan ducked the slashing talons and swam to Leon.

A wave kicked by the T. rex shoved Ryan into Leon's immobile frame. Ryan wrapped his arms around Leon's torso and pulled him towards the shore.

Ryan yearned for air like morphine. His lungs were withered, and his legs were leaden. Leon was dead weight; his jaw was slack. Ryan's eyes burned, and the cold burrowed into his bones. Gravity pulled him down, but he kicked and screamed his last breath in desperation. He pulled Leon towards the rippling surface of the river, where his last bubbles of oxygen had escaped to. His vision dimmed, and his ears were ringing. He could feel his consciousness slipping away.

Ryan's feet found the sloping river bank, and he broke through the water's surface. He gasped like a vacuum, pulling warm air into his lungs. His legs bowed painfully, drained of blood and energy, and he dragged Leon by his arms towards the powder-white shore. Leon didn't stir.

Ryan looked over his shoulder and saw that the T. rex had reclaimed its bearings. It slid through the water like an enormous crocodile, water glittering on its feathers like crystal beads.

"Oh, of course it can swim!" Ryan screamed.

"Hey, over here!"

Ryan turned at the sound of a Russian accent. A frail figure stood on the shoreline. The man was little more than pale skin stretched over a skeleton, draped in tattered khaki clothing. His hair was frizzled straw. Bloodshot eyes bulged from behind his spider-webbed spectacles. He ran across the shore and shouted, "Come on, follow me!"

A meteor could have crashed into the earth and Ryan wouldn't have been surprised. The starved young Russian waded in and helped Ryan drag Leon onto the shore. Ryan collapsed, crawled over to Leon, and continued pulling him. Ryan's limbs were useless. His breath came out in ragged gasps. He felt like he was going to faint.

Ryan and the Russian pulled Leon over to the mangrove forest

and dragged him beneath the shade of the canopy. When Ryan turned, he saw the T. rex walking out of the river, the muffled footsteps pounding against the sand. The T. rex shook its mane dry and howled mournfully.

The call was returned on the opposite bank. The Mother Tyrannosaurus stared down at the Father Tyrannosaurus from the cliff face with her chicks.

The Russian paused to watch. He pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose.

"That's the Mother T. rex across the river," the Russian said. "T. rex's mate for life, like penguins, with the Mother raising the chicks and the Father hunting for the family. Without the Father present, the Mother will have to bring their chicks along to hunt. The Father is going to do everything in his power to get back to his territory and return to his family. We should be safe...for now."

The man licked his chapped lips and looked at Ryan.

"Is this a bad time?"

Ryan was performing CPR on Leon, pumping his sternum with mounting desperation. Ryan paused, stooped over to listen to Leon's breathing, frowned, and continued his compressions. "Come on, Leon, wake up," he growled. "You've gotta wake up."

Ryan paused to listen to Leon's breathing. He scowled and pumped Leon's chest three more times. "Wake up, you fucking kid," he hissed. "You need to go home. Just wake up, it's all you gotta do."

The Russian watched in silence. The tyrannosaurs howled to one another from across the opposing river banks.

"Wake up, goddammit!" Ryan shouted, and he pounded Leon's chest. "Wake up, Leon! Wake up!"

Leon spasmed and puked. He turned on his side and curled into a ball, gagging brine and bile. Ryan patted him on the back.

"That's it, buddy, let it all out. Just get it out of your system. You'll be okay, just breathe. Just breathe."

Leon opened his eyes. The world was fuzzy. He focused on Ryan's face and winced at the gruesome sight. "What happened?" Leon rasped. "What happened to you?"

Ryan squinted, confused, but then he felt the cool air on his face and he tugged his mask back in place. He cleared his throat and squeezed Leon's shoulder.

"We made it," Ryan said. "We're alive."

“Ah-hem,”

Ryan and Leon stared at the Russian. There was an awkward silence in the air. Ryan glanced at the man’s forearms and saw black welts along his veins. Ryan instinctively itched the veins of his own arm.

“Right, well...” the man said. “I suppose we can hide in my lab. We’ll be safe from the Father T. rex and the deinonychus flocks there. We should get moving.”

The man stood and turned to leave. Ryan and Leon remained on the ground. The man turned and grumbled, “Well, what are you waiting for? We have important matters to discuss.”

“We have to find the rest of our squad,” Ryan said. “We can’t just leave them back there...”

“It won’t matter where you find each other if you’re all dead,” the Russian said, coughing. “Now hurry up and follow me. We’ve got work to do.”

Ryan and Leon looked at each other, and then back at the two tyrannosaurs howling from the shore. They quickly climbed to their feet and followed the Russian man into the depths of the mangrove swamp, the roar of the tyrannosaurs echoing behind them.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – THE HERD

After the men of Vulture Squad saw the Father tyrannosaurus’s pursuit of Ryan and Leon, Xavier decided it would be best if they kept a wide berth from the predator’s nest. They quickly trekked north towards a downhill slope in the shoreline where they could cross the river. Once they crossed the river, they would begin the search for their missing captain and rookie.

Until then, Xavier was the de facto leader of Vulture Squad. As Ryan’s second in command and an expert tracker, the others were more than happy to follow his lead.

Xavier led the group down a trail through leafy rhododendron that surrounded them like a dark fog. The rhododendron’s unrestrained growth allowed it to stretch over their heads, sieving the light of dawn. Boulders blanketed with moss sat along the trail like lumbering green beasts. Dead tree roots festering with spiders and millipedes lay curled at their feet.

Xavier remained unblinking to the mosquitoes that danced around his eyes. His paranoia was overwhelming. With the

appearance of the sun came an otherworldly diapason of wildlife sounds; unseen beasts howled through the valley, and creatures screamed in the distance like alien wraiths. This was not the wilderness that Xavier knew.

The others were equally apprehensive. They never seemed to stop bobbing their heads, their eyes flickering like matches. A snapped twig would catch their full attention, and then the low hiss of a snake would make them look away again. The increasing humidity made them sweat through their clothes.

Gerald was chain-smoking through his pack of Camels. He tongued the butt of a cigarette to the corner of his lips and mumbled, "I fucking told you guys something was up. I told you Jericho was hiding something from us, and here it is, right in our faces. Dinosaurs. *Goddamn dinosaurs*. God knows how they got here, but Jericho knew they were here. He had to. I'm sure it's why the Green Beret are missing."

"We don't know that for sure," Miller said. He ran a hand through his sweat-soaked copper hair. "If Jericho knew they were here, why would he send us in blind? Why not clear the entire valley with Agent Orange or DDT and raze what's left?"

"Cause Jericho's a liar, that's why," Gerald said. "Open your eyes, man, he's leading us astray. You need to quit being a sheep led by wolves dressed as shepherds. Quit being the lamb and be the lion." "That was...eloquent," Miller said, "But fuck off."

"What I want to know is what those buildings were, the Res-Stat," Gerald continued. "I have a feeling that whatever we need to know about the dinosaurs will be there. Maybe when we find Ryan and Leon we can hit that last Res-Stat building and be done with this whole fucked up mission. We can be out of here in no time if we're lucky."

"If Jericho will let us live with what we know," Logan said.

"Please, I'd like to see him or any of his SOG goons come at me," Eli grunted. "I'll fuck 'em up, all of 'em, no hands. I'll kick the shit out of 'em and feed 'em to that tricycloplots or whatever it was."

"You're thinking of a triceratops, and no, Eli, it was a tyrannosaurus," Gerald said.

"Whatever. Either way, they're gonna be bronto burgers," Eli grunted. "Extinct."

"Corny," Gerald laughed.

"*Would you all shut the fuck up?*" Xavier hissed, whipping his head

over his shoulder. "I swear to god, it's like you guys forgot we've got dinosaurs and Viet Cong to worry about. It's bad enough as it is without all the conspiracy theories and stupid jokes."

"Sorry, Xaves," Gerald said. "It's better than thinking about getting eaten, is all."

Xavier frowned over his shoulder. The painfully drawn and bloodshot eyes of the others were the same as his own. They all felt the same sickening mixture of adrenaline, paranoia, and fear that flowed through their veins like methamphetamine. Xavier sighed, exasperated.

"Don't worry, guys. We're going to be okay. Everything's going to be fine."

Xavier's lie hung in the air until a sudden whip-crack startled them. They jumped and held their rifles to their cheeks, scanning the forest. Another *crack* sparked the air like a firework. Gerald and Logan shared a nervous look. Eli flinched at another *crack*, like a bone being snapped in half. The sound rang in their ears.

Xavier discerned the sound was coming from downhill. He suspected a small animal or dinosaur had created the trail they were following, but now he considered it might have been made by men. The noises they were hearing sounded like small-arms fire. Xavier motioned for silence and crept low to the ground.

The echoing reports grew louder as they approached the end of the trail. The walls of rhododendron shrank back, and fragrant orchids with delicate purple petals surrounded them. At the end of the trail was a wild orchard of persimmon trees, ripe with sweet red fruit. The undergrowth was trampled to a flat green carpet beneath the trees.

Bushy camellia shrubs with scarlet flowers framed the clearing. Black gibbons and silver-haired monkeys swung from the boughs of the wide-spread tree-tops. The serene scenery was tainted by the pervading musk of urine. Xavier crinkled his nose in disgust. Everyone else crowded behind him.

"What the hell's that smell?" Eli whispered.

Two orange creatures collided head-first in front of Xavier with the sound of a shotgun blast. Xavier fell backwards into Eli and Logan, and they scrambled away.

A pair of pale-orange dinosaurs the size of ponies scuffled in front of the group. They fought viciously with domed skulls rimmed by thorny protuberances. One of the dinosaurs kicked the other with a

strong leg, and the other pushed back with small grasping arms. Their skin was like sandpaper pulled taut over rippling muscles. They reared their heads back and cracked them together with a painful bark.

“Stygmolochs,” Gerald said. “I’ve seen these before in one of Leon’s encyclopedias. They’re vegetarians.”

“Good to know, Dr. Challenger,” Eli replied.

The fight was savage. A stygmoloch with dark striations on its back slashed the other’s flank with the talons on its foot. The other stygmoloch, which had a larger dome and longer thorns, slammed its head into the striped stygmoloch’s arm with a sickening *crunch* of bone. The striped stygmoloch howled in pain and staggered backwards. Splintered bone protruded from the mangled arm.

The striped stygmoloch cowered and slunk away, mewling pitifully. The victorious stygmoloch stood high and barked furiously in triumph. With its tail held high, it sprayed hot urine like rancid cider in the air. The pungent stench struck the men like mace; they clasped their hands over their mouths and retched. “It must be mating season,” Xavier said through his fingers. “Some of the most dangerous animals are male herbivores in mating season, like deer, elk, buffalo. If these animals are anything like that, we’ll want to keep our distance.”

Several more stygmolochs trotted out from the orchard and gathered around the victorious male. Domed skulls clacked like rocks around the towering fruit trees. A female stygmoloch with a diminished crown of thorns trotted in front of the clashing males, waving her tail eagerly.

Xavier climbed to his feet and saw dozens more of the odd dinosaurs scattered throughout the orchard. Infants circled their mothers and ate ferns from the crevices of the persimmon trees’ roots. Hormonal males scraped their thorns against the tree trunks, slaving rabidly. The crazed look in their goatish eyes made Xavier tighten his jaw.

“Alright, stick to the edge of the clearing and follow me,” he said. “Just keep your distance from the animals; no sudden movements or eye contact, and we’ll be alright.”

“Are you sure about that?” Gerald asked.

“Yeah, sure,” Xavier mumbled.

Xavier slowly crept along the edge of the dark green camellia. The others aimed their rifles at the stygmolochs and followed close

behind him. A thick stew of humidity, astringent urine, and harsh musk filled the air. Dark scat was sprinkled generously across the forest floor. Logan gagged and pulled his confederate bandana over his mouth.

The smell grew worse as they went, and the cacophony of sounds increased. Male and female stygimolochs, mounted in copulation, groaned and yowled with their heads reared back. Miller grimaced in disgust.

“Well, now I can check that off of my bucket list,” Eli muttered. Xavier furrowed his brow at Eli. He wouldn’t speak his mind, but he found the herd of peaceful dinosaurs more unsettling than the *Tyrannosaurus rex*. The presence of a colony meant that the animals had adapted to the environment of the valley, and the environment was very similar to that of Laos and Cambodia.

The dinosaurs could be an isolated incident, but if they were to spread to the jungles of Vietnam’s neighboring countries, there would be no containing them. Hell, he was watching and listening to them reproduce. They wouldn’t be isolated any longer. Something else that Xavier found disconcerting was the genuine tranquility of the moment. Despite his nagging concerns, the orchard was peaceful. The stygimolochs were unperturbed by the presence of the men. The dinosaurs were occupied with their foraging and mating rituals. In Xavier’s experience, mating grounds such as these were magnets for predators. The scent of bodily fluids could lure carnivores from miles around.

Xavier briefly considered that the gibbons in the canopy could serve as a sort of alarm system for the dinosaurs, making noise if they saw danger. A symbiotic relationship between modern animals and dinosaurs would be a remarkable thing.

A pair of stygimolochs were fighting a few meters away. The larger of the two rammed into the smaller male and pinned it against a tree. The smaller male squealed and clawed at his attacker’s face. The larger male struck his dome into the smaller male’s neck once-twice-three times against the tree. The smaller male fell at his rival’s feet and crawled away.

The victorious stygimoloch turned its back to Vulture Squad and barked rapidly at the fleeing victim. The stygimoloch raised its tail and sprayed Eli in the face with hot, musky urine. Eli fell backwards, sputtering and flailing. The rest of the squad stood frozen in shock.

"It's in my eyes! It's in my fucking eyes!" Eli squealed. He clambered out of the brush, grabbed his Ithaca, and aimed it at the stygimoloch. "That thing's fucking dead. Nothing pisses in my face and gets away with it!"

"Calm down, Eli," Gerald said, stifling a laugh.

Eli pumped a round into his shotgun and took another step forward. The stygimoloch looked over its shoulder at Eli, oblivious but wild eyed. Slobber hung in thick strands from its beaked snout. Eli squinted and aimed between the creature's eyes. Xavier pushed the barrel away.

"Stop it, Eli," Xavier growled, "You don't know what that thing could do to you."

Eli huffed and lowered his Ithaca. "I know what I could do to it," he said. "Skin it; make myself some new boots and a helmet. Ugly bastard."

"We don't know anything about these creatures," Xavier said. "Just try to remain calm, and let's keep going."

"Easy for you to say," Eli said. He sniffed his soaked uniform and grimaced.

"I'd say it's an improvement," Gerald said. "Better than your booze-sweat."

"Shut up," Eli said. He had been reaching for the flask, but he pushed it deeper into his pocket.

They watched as the stygimoloch trotted away to a female at the opposite end of the clearing. The female lowered herself onto the ground and put her tail in the air. The male was positioning himself over the female when the gibbons in the canopy suddenly began to shriek. The lithe black apes flung themselves through the tree tops, away from the orchard. Leaves spiraled down like emerald pinwheels in their wake.

The herd of stygimolochs took notice and stood at alert. They started to dart around the tree trunks, barking and snorting. Xavier scanned their surroundings and froze. He heard a sharp hiss, like steam seeping through metal.

"What's happening, Xaves?" Gerald asked. He watched the stygimolochs on the opposite end of the orchard through his M14's scope. "What are they freaking out about?"

Xavier didn't speak. He was focused on a patch of camellia bush several meters ahead. Amongst the bright, bloody blossoms, a pair of yellow eyes stared back. A leathery, turquoise snout slid through

the waxy leaves. The jaws parted; a snarl sifted through the creature's bared teeth. Xavier's heart leapt against his rib cage. He was frozen, staring wide eyed. It was the same creature that he had seen the night before.

The animal was a Deinonychus, a small pack-hunting dinosaur and a close relative of Velociraptor. Xavier didn't know the name, but he recognized the cold eyes and menacing posture of a predator about to attack.

"Run," Xavier gasped. "*Run!*"

Shrill screams fell from the canopy, and the herd broke into a thunderous stampede. Xavier and the others scrambled to get out of the way. A shriek like lightning ripped through the air and a deinonychus burst out of the camellia, a blur of iridescent blue and black feathers. The wolf-sized dinosaur pounced a stygimoloch and tackled it to the ground with dizzying speed. Xavier winced at the *whump* of impact.

The deinonychus wrestled on top of the stygimoloch and hooked a pair of sickle-shaped toe-claws into its spine. The stygimoloch howled in pain and swung its head backwards. The deinonychus caught the stygimoloch's throat in its taloned hands and pulled back, splitting the flesh into ragged shreds.

Xavier was entranced as he watched the rest of the herd maneuver around the bloody fray. The wounded dinosaur weakly choked and squirmed. Crimson flowed freely from the musculature of its ravaged throat. The deinonychus clamped its jaws over the stygimoloch's snout to keep it from breathing. With a weak groan, the stygimoloch's body relaxed and ceased to move. Blood pooled beneath it.

The deinonychus stood on its hind legs, spread its feathered arms wide, and shrieked to signify its kill. A similar scream was returned across the clearing, and another came from the tree tops. Xavier felt disoriented from his shock.

"Xavier, snap out of it!" Gerald shouted.

Xavier broke from his trance, and his skull became filled with the pounding of a hundred feet like African drums. Several deinonychus screamed from the tree tops and others weaved around the herd below.

Xavier immediately recognized the pattern of the hunt; the deinonychus in the tree tops leapt from tree to tree, working the best angle they could, while the others below herded the

stygomoloch like sheep. Xavier knew they couldn't hope to outrun the deinonychus, but they could give them more targets to choose from.

"Quick, into the herd!" Xavier shouted.

The deinonychus screeched at them from atop the dead stygomoloch and splayed its arms wide. The small carnivore leapt at Xavier, but he dove away. The deinonychus hit the tree behind him, dug its claws into the thick bark, and skittered up the trunk like a giant gecko. Xavier looked over shoulder at his shocked squad mates and shouted, "Hurry, go!"

Miller and Logan pulled Xavier to his feet, and they charged into the stampeding herd. The air was filled with screams and drumming footsteps. The ground rumbled beneath them. Dust choked the air. The stygomolochs moved like a current, rolling around the tree trunks, herding the men along.

A stygomoloch whacked its skull against Eli for a wider berth. He grunted and grasped his elbow, teeth grit in pain. Another stygomoloch whacked its dome against the base of Logan's spine and nearly sent him sprawling. Xavier caught him and feigned away from another stygomoloch's bucking head.

Shreds of bark and foliage showered onto them, and Xavier looked up to see six deinonychus above, leaping from tree-trunk to tree-trunk with nimble grace. Xavier panted and pumped his arms harder.

Several deinonychus weaved around the outer trees and snapped their jaws at the straggling stygomolochs. A howl surged over Xavier and a deinonychus sailed overhead.

The airborne deinonychus landed on a stygomoloch several feet ahead, and the two animals tumbled in a snarling, spitting mess of feathers and claws. The other stygomolochs split into two currents around the tangle, pulling the squad one way and Eli the other.

Eli panicked and tried to cut to the right, towards the rest of the squad, but he was rammed in the side by a stygomoloch's thorny skull. He tumbled over and got kicked across the back by slashing claws. Powerful feet pounded his sides and trampled over him.

Miller turned and screamed, "*Eli!*"

Eli was smothered by dust and heat. He could only see swinging legs and stamping three-toed feet. Blood dribbled from his cuts. His bruises throbbed. He cowered beneath the stampede and covered his face. When he looked up, he saw a deinonychus watching from

the bough of a persimmon tree. It stared with cunning, emotionless eyes.

It was waiting for the herd to finish him off.

Eli choked and tried to scream for help, but he was mute beneath the sound of thunder.

Gunshots punctuated the air. The stygimolochs ran around Eli and sunlight fell upon him. The darkness was lifted; he could breathe. He squinted at a silhouette cast against the intense sunlight that bore through the trees. The deinonychus squirmed in the branches like eager leopards, swinging their tails in the air and flicking their claws.

Miller pulled Eli to his feet by the collar of his vest, slapped him on the helmet, and said, "Semper fi, Eli, Semper fi, say it with me. Semper fi, Semper fi, Semper fi!"

"Semper fi, Semper fi, Semper fi!" Eli chanted back. The familiar chant, the slogan of the Marines that Eli and Miller had served with, helped to pull his mind from the muddled chaos. Miller brought his M16A1 high and fired a burst at the deinonychus in the trees. The predators hissed and scattered to other branches.

Xavier, Gerald, and Logan came and gathered in a circle around Eli and Miller. The rest of the stygimoloch herd dispersed and trampled further into the depths of the jungle. Without the herd, they were exposed to the dozen deinonychus lurking in the orchard. Xavier saw this and felt his nerve endings alight with panic.

"Guys, we gotta go *now*," Xavier said.

"Where do we go?" Gerald asked.

Several deinonychus slunk out from around the trees and walked closer on their muscular hind-limbs. They moved with the head-bobbing gait of birds, and their arms were folded against their chests like wings. The small carnivores lowered their heads at Vulture Squad and hissed viciously. The other deinonychus clinging to the trunks and branches of the persimmon trees watched them in silence.

The men were surrounded.

"It doesn't matter where we go," Xavier whispered. "*Just run.*"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – ANDREI WYNN

“Welcome to my home, gentlemen.”

Ryan stared past the Russian man at the oppressive face of the research station. It was a totalitarian concrete structure, streaked with dark shades of mold and moss. The roof was a pyramid of skeletal black rods with sickly panes of translucent yellow glass. Gossamer and ivy drifted from the corners of the building. A heavily dented and scarred metal door dared them to enter.

The clearing around the building was disheveled and littered with rotting crates and rusted equipment. Bent and broken black fence beams strung sagging razor wire around the clearing. The jungle was encroaching; the branches of the upper-canopy stretched over the fence and cast shadows over the building. Ryan looked at the Russian and leveled his rifle to the man’s sunken ribcage.

“Who are you?” Ryan asked. “What is this place?”

The Russian matched Ryan’s steely gaze. “My name is Andrei Wynn, and I just saved your lives, so you better lower your weapon.”

Ryan glanced at Leon, nodded, and they lowered their rifles. Andrei hooked his bony fingers around the door handle and tugged at it. The door tore open with a sharp screech of metal that made Ryan wince.

Andrei huffed and dragged the shrieking door the rest of the way open. The room beyond was filled with a cosmos of dust particles that glittered golden in the filtrated sunlight. Andrei swept his arm across the yawning mouth of the behemoth structure.

“Welcome to Research Station 4,” Andrei grumbled. “My home away from home for the past two years.” His frayed blonde hair hung limply over his dark bespectacled eyes.

Ryan studied Andrei as if he were a serpent with its fangs bared. Leon stepped past him.

“So this must be Res/Stat 4,” Leon said. “Where are the Green Beret?”

“If those are people, they’re probably dead,” Andrei grunted.

“That’s all that happens in this valley. This land is a place of death. Not many men have set foot into these jungles, and even fewer have ever left alive. I’m what you could call one of the ‘lucky’ ones.” Andrei stepped inside of the research station and shambled through the clouds of dust. Ryan and Leon followed their rifles through the doorway, cautiously checking their surroundings. Andrei glanced over his shoulder and wrung a laugh from his dry throat.

“Don’t worry; this is the safest place to be in the valley right now. Besides, if we were in a situation where you had to use your weapons, there wouldn’t be any point. We wouldn’t survive long enough to fight back. Just pull up a chair, relax, and let’s talk about why we’re here.”

Ryan scanned the room. Rusted metal tables and chairs were spread throughout the lab. On the right-hand wall was a row of lockers; tables covered in strewn papers sat beneath musty yellow windows on the left. The smell of mildew, urine, and sweat hung in the air.

Ryan found a folding chair and warily sat down. Leon dropped into a chair beside him. They shared brief eye contact; Ryan’s eyes were hard as jade, but Leon’s were electric currents of shocked blue. Ryan could see the misfiring behind Leon’s wide pupils, so he put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

“You did good,” Ryan said.

“And yet I still don’t get any thanks,” Andrei said. He sat down across from Ryan and laid a metal box with chipping red paint on his lap. Andrei popped open the clasps, reached inside, and pulled out a syrette of morphine.

Ryan and Leon watched as Andrei tugged back his tattered shirt sleeve, revealing a rotten black crater blinking pus in the crook of his elbow. Andrei whispered breathlessly with lust and sank the gleaming needle into the mahogany pustule. Leon’s eyes widened.

“Jesus Christ,” Leon whispered. “What the fuck are you doing?” Andrei groaned and shook in numbing ecstasy. The syrette bobbed in his pulsating vein. A contented sigh heaved itself from the pit of his stomach and fell through his lips like a limp leech. He melted into the chair, and his arms dripped off to his sides. His jaw suspended wide, exposing black kernels buried in gray gums.

Leon gawked in disgust. Ryan felt a timid, fluid warmth in his gut. He scraped the skin of his forearm with his nails. There was a familiar rush of endorphins at the sight of the dripping needle that filled him with bittersweet nostalgia. He licked his chapped lips. A long-forgotten scene was frozen in Ryan’s mind; he was swathed in pristine white sheets, laid beside a window brimming with ethereal light. The morphine was chrisp in his veins. It swirled with his sable spirit and crawled through the sinews of muscle, evaporating layers of flesh that steamed off of his bones.

The light overtook him, and the echoing thunder of shells and screams faded into an ambient drone. He was discarnate, fading

into the open air. There was no pain; no more suffering through thought. It was the greatest sensation in Ryan's life, and he yearned for it like the gentle embrace of a lover-

"Ryan, say something!" Leon said.

Ryan snapped upright in his chair, alarmed, and he sighed wearily, sagging back into place. He knuckled his eyes and shook his head. His mask was soggy and stunk of the river, but he wouldn't remove it. When he opened his eyes, he saw Andrei staring at him through a haze of intoxication. His lips were drawn in a Cheshire grin.

"I know that look," Andrei drawled. "I only have a little bit left, but you're welcome to have some. What's mine is yours."

"Shut up!"

Ryan banged his fists onto the table. Leon flinched, and Andrei raised his eyebrows.

"What is this place, and why did you bring us here?" Ryan demanded. "What the fuck are dinosaurs doing in this jungle, and why the hell are you here? What the hell is going on!?"

Ryan shook with bewildered rage. His pupils grazed the syringe. He redirected them to Andrei's sunken eyes. "Well?! Start talking or I'm going to make you talk! I want answers!"

Andrei sighed and put a hand to his gaunt face. His eyes were glazed with recollection.

"It feels so good to hear voices again," Andrei muttered. "So good. Like balm. I've been here alone for over a year now, ever since General Borodin had all the scientists executed that were involved with our project. We knew what went wrong, and he didn't want anybody to know. He wanted to begin anew unimpeded.

"I was here, at this research station, when the helicopters came. I happened to be studying triceratops feces when I heard them. I heard the gunshots, and I hid in the bushes and watched as my colleagues were slaughtered like sheep. Some of the greatest minds I had ever known, slain without mercy. I never knew such carnage."

Leon leaned forward in his chair. "What were you studying here?"

"We were researching how the dinosaurs melded with the natural ecosystem," Andrei said. "It was a novelty, of course. There was no control, no attempts made to treat the irrevocable damage we had done to the natural world.

"General Borodin didn't care. All he wanted was his precious

Collider, the procurement of antimatter. He wanted bombs...he wanted to destroy your country. He didn't care about the consequences of his actions. He didn't care about the destruction of the natural world. He only wanted that- destruction."

Ryan groaned and rubbed his temples, trying to make sense of everything Andrei was saying. He felt like he was losing his mind. He wanted to scream, but more than that, he wanted to take some of the morphine. He let go of the breath he had been holding in and looked at Leon.

"Leon, see if the radio is still working," Ryan said. "We need to get an evac or something. This entire mission has gone out of hand. We're way out our element."

Leon nodded and took the radio out of his backpack. It was a large green metal box with a phone receiver attached to its side. He put the receiver to his ear and turned some of the dials. He listened to the buzzing hiss of static.

"It's working, sir," Leon said.

"Good," Ryan exhaled. He narrowed his eyes at Andrei. "Now, what were you saying? You were talking about a Collider or something. What is that? What does it do?"

"That is...a secret," Andrei said. "I'm afraid I can't tell you anymore. Information is the greatest commodity in a war, and I can see you've been deprived of it. What are you doing in this valley? What did your leaders tell you that you were doing here?"

Ryan hesitated, chewing on his lip. He didn't know if he should trust the drug-addled hermit scientist, but he decided he had nothing else to lose. He had already been chased off a cliff by a Tyrannosaurus rex, and his squad was missing in the jungle. He needed all the help he could get at this point.

"We were looking for a missing platoon of Green Beret," Ryan said. "Chances are, they were looking for that general you mentioned, General Borodin. Our commanding officer didn't tell us anything about this-not the dinosaurs, the collider, or even that there was a Russian presence in the valley. They didn't tell us anything."

Andrei cackled.

"You were pawns, just like me. We're all pawns. That's all we'll ever be to them."

"God...*damn it*," Ryan growled. "That son of a bitch lied to me again! He had to have known all of this, and he didn't give us any

forewarning. My men are out there right now, lost and being hunted, and here I am, high and dry! This is bullshit! *Bullshit! Fuck!*"

Ryan slammed his fist against the table again, harder. "I'm going to skin that fucker alive when I see him. I've got to get my guys out of here. I need an evac."

"I've got a signal," Leon spoke up. "I think I'm getting put through to Jericho."

Ryan glanced at Andrei.

"Why are you helping us?" he asked.

Andrei's head hung back, and he smiled at the aura of yellow-green light suspended by the drifting dust.

"I've been hiding, dying, with nothing to do but shoot up and starve," he said. "Scavenging in the forest for food. Living in perpetual paranoia and guilt for what I've done. The dinosaurs... they were my doing. I didn't mean to bring them here. They were a side effect-the fallout.

"I've been living day to day just waiting for somebody to confess my sins to. Maybe somebody that can stop what's happening in this valley. What Borodin wants to do to the world, intentional or not."

"Wait, what?" Ryan said, squinting. "You *brought* the dinosaurs here?"

Andrei smiled and shrugged.

They heard a burst of static from the radio, and Leon quickly said, "Alpha Juliet Oscar, this is Lima Victor Sierra, do you read me? Over!"

"I read, Lima, over," Jericho's voice grumbled through the static. Ryan took the headset from Leon and held it up to his ear.

"Sir, this is Captain Baker, requesting an immediate evac. We've come under heavy fire, and we need an immediate evac, I repeat, immediate evac, over."

Buzzing silence.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, over."

"Sir, I can't stress enough how badly we need to leave," Ryan said, "The lives of my men depend on it. If we don't get an evac, we won't survive until sundown. Requesting an immediate evac to reassess before returning, over."

Jericho sighed audibly.

“Cut the horseshit, Baker. I don’t need to hear you beg, I need to know what’s happening. Have you run into heavy resistance? Victor Charlie? Have you found the Green Beret? I need answers, Baker. Over.”

Ryan ground his teeth until the bones clicked in his jaws. Leon watched him expectantly, and Andrei smirked. Anger was building in Ryan’s gut; he could feel it seep through his skin like smoke. “I know about the collider, Jericho,” Ryan growled. “And the Russians, and the...fallout.”

A pause. The men looked at each other.

“What do you know, Baker? I need to know *now*, for god’s sakes, tell me what you know! I swear to god, if you don’t tell me everything right now, you can say goodbye to your career, you simpering little shit--“

“If you want your information, send me an immediate evac and additional backup forces,” Ryan said. “I want your SOG goons out here, not my men. Send an evac now, or you’ll never get your precious intel.”

“Baker, I’m warning you!”

“Sun’s setting, sir!” Ryan shouted. “Sun’s setting soon!”

“Fine,” Jericho snapped, “Fine! I’ll send Ricardo and the Father Vulture with additional forces. They’ll track your coordinates, and when they bring you back, I’m going to bleed you like a stuck pig. I swear, Baker, I’m going to have your ass. You were lucky I didn’t have you court martialed after your last operation for me, but now you’re going to get it. Get ready for holy fucking fire, Baker--”

Ryan cracked the headset into the receiver and shoved the radio across the table. He brought his fists down with a *bang* and panted heavily through his mask. Leon stared at him. Andrei sneered, treacle dripping from his teeth. Ryan looked at them.

“That felt good,” Ryan said. “Really good.”

“It’s always nice to have a release,” Andrei drawled. “Now. we wait.”

“Not a chance,” Ryan said. “We’re going to find the rest of the squad. Come on, Leon.”

Leon stood and followed Ryan to the door. Andrei stumbled to his feet and said, “You’re not seriously going back out there, are you? You just got chased by a T. rex and you want to go *back*?”

“My men need me,” Ryan said. He shoved the door open, grunting

with effort. “You can come and help us, or you can sit here and keep waiting to die. It’s your choice. All I know is, I’d rather be fighting than dying.”

“Damn...” Andrei muttered. He rifled through his first aid kit and found that all of his syringes were empty. With a weary sigh, he shut the kit and dropped it.

“Alright, gentlemen. Let’s find your hopeless bastards.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – TO MOCK A KILLING BIRD

Xavier was running for his life through a never-ending maze. The mid-day sun filled the swamp with a slurried fog that blurred the mangrove trees into twisted black phantoms with dark, creeping tendrils. The rest of the squad drifted around Xavier like ghosts, fading in and out of the fog. The screams of the pursuing deinonychus echoed from the dark of the distant canopy.

Xavier’s heart pumped haphazardly like a misfiring motor. Ever since they had crossed the river, his body had become a shell filled with frayed nerve endings soaked in adrenaline. He was amazed that he hadn’t died of a heart attack.

Vulture Squad had been slogging through the mangrove swamp for several minutes, but it had felt like an eon. Their bodies were

slathered in retched filth that reeked of excrement. With each passing minute, their bodies broke down even further. Their legs buckled beneath them. The humidity turned the air in their lungs to concrete. Xavier gasped and wheezed as he pulled his boots through sucking mud.

The fog never lifted. The expanse of mangrove trees and mud was endless, and the sounds of their tormenters never ceased. The deinonychus were always on the periphery, scrabbling across bark, shifting through the foliage, snapping their jaws and yowling like wraiths. It was a fever dream of hell.

"I can't," Eli gasped, and he collapsed into the mud. "I can't, I gotta, I gotta stop, I gotta--"

"Get up!" Xavier barked.

Miller and Xavier pulled Eli up by his armpits and dragged him through the mud. Snarling shapes swirled around them. Logan fired his rifle into the fog, and Gerald fired a few rounds as well. The shadows receded.

"Get your ass in gear, Eli!" Xavier shouted. His voice was frantic, and his wet hair hung over his bulging eyes. He brushed it aside.

"Move! *Move!*"

"We can't run, we have to fight!" Miller said.

"Do you want to get eaten alive?!" Xavier shrieked. "Did you see what happened to those Stygi-whatevers? Do you want that to happen to you?" He jammed his finger into Miller's chest. "Well? Do you?!"

"Fuck off, Xavier," Miller said. He slapped Xavier's hand away. "If Ryan were here, he'd tell us to stand our ground and fight."

The circling shadows returned. Gerald and Logan opened fire, but the deinonychus easily ducked away. The canopy rustled over their heads. Miller and Xavier directed their rifles upright as leaves fell onto them.

Eli pulled himself out of the mud and put his back against a tree. He looked around with his Ithaca. The ring of predators tightened. Footsteps spattered closer.

"Guys," Eli said, "I'm sorry."

Moist breath brushed the back of Eli's neck. Claws scraped across the tree bark beside his head. He saw reptilian jaws widening in the corner of his eye. A scream burst from his mouth as feathers flurried across his face. The weight of the deinonychus plowed him into the mud. He swung his Ithaca, missed, and felt the mud rush beneath

him.

“*Miller!*” Eli wailed as he was ripped away from the group. Miller sprinted after Eli’s vanishing silhouette and dissipated into the mist.

“Miller, no! Stick together!” Xavier screamed. “*Dammit!*”

“Come on, let’s go!” Gerald said.

Gerald and Logan ran after the streak of mud left in Eli’s wake. Xavier cursed and followed them, aiming his rifle back and forth. His eyes scoured the slate-thick fog for shadows. The blood was drained from his legs. He struggled to keep up with Gerald and Logan, who were already fading away. Xavier shouted after them. “No-wait!”

Eli yelled for help, and his voice was drowned by a shrieking deinonychus. Miller called out Eli’s name, and Gerald yelled back. Xavier couldn’t even see them anymore. He looked to his right and saw shapes slinking through the swamp grass.

The canopy opened above Xavier’s head and a deinonychus crashed into him, driving him into the marshy earth. His screams were cut off when a pair of jaws clamped over his throat.

“Get this fuckin’ bird offa me!” Eli screamed.

Eli spat and swore as a deinonychus crawled over his body. He kicked frantically as the claws sliced through his pant legs and scraped his flesh. The deinonychus lunged for his throat, and he elbowed it hard in the side of the head, diverting the attack. Snarling, the deinonychus slashed Eli’s chest.

Eli howled as fire spread across his sternum. He ripped his knife from its sheath and swung it at the creature’s throat. The deinonychus reared its head back and slashed its forearm at Eli’s face.

Claws whistled past Eli’s cheek. He jabbed the knife into the side of the deinonychus’s neck and it shrieked, feigning away.

“Oh, no, you don’t, you little chicken-shit!” Eli hissed through his clenched teeth. He grabbed the fleeing deinonychus by its tail and wrestled onto its back, shoving his elbows into its spine. The screaming beast flailed in the mud, splattering them both. Eli wrapped his arm around the deinonychus’s neck, tugged it back, and raked his knife across its throat.

Hot blood spilled over Eli’s arm. The deinonychus gurgled and snapped its jaws spastically. Eli gripped the mane of feathers and

pulled back with a sneer.

“Let it all out,” he growled.

The animal’s jaws went slack and the body turned soft. Eli shoved the predator’s head beneath the mud and pushed himself up to his feet. The wounds on his chest spread open and his knees buckled. Wheezing, he clutched at the blood flowing down his stomach.

Distant panic crept through Eli’s mind, but he was beyond thought. He stared up at the walls of fog and saw two shapes, approaching quickly. He scrambled to his feet, slipped, and fell face-first.

A pair of feet landed on the small of his back and dug in with sickle-shaped talons. Eli screamed as the deinonychus clutched his shoulders with its clawed forearms. Narrow jaws held him by the back of his neck. Spit drizzled into his hair.

Eli threw his shoulders back and swung his elbows, but the deinonychus was anchored in place on top of him. The creature pushed his head beneath the mud, and he had the sensation of being buried alive, of unending silence and darkness. His screams were as empty as his skull. He waited for the vibrant pain of jaws breaking his neck.

Peppered gunshots broke the silence, and the weight was lifted.

Eli scrambled blindly away. More gunshots and the pained squeals of the deinonychus filled the air. Eli swiped the mud from his eyes and saw Miller standing over the corpse of the deinonychus, his rifle smoking in his hand. He held Eli’s shotgun in the other. Miller caught Eli’s eyes, and he tossed the shotgun.

Eli caught the Ithaca and used it like a cane to stand. A shape sped towards Miller’s backside. Eli shouted to duck, and Miller dove away. Eli pumped his shotgun and blasted the approaching deinonychus with a slug. The deinonychus was thrown backwards off of its feet, into the mist. Eli and Miller stared at each other, panting.

“Just like Hue City,” Eli said.

“Exactly,” Miller laughed.

Xavier’s screams interrupted the momentary silence. Eli staggered, grit his teeth, and ran with Miller towards the cries of pain.

Xavier knew this day would come.

It was his greatest fear: a ravenous wild animal sitting on his chest, its claws submerging into his flesh; serrated teeth slicing

through his fingers as he held the jaws open inches from his throat.

In his gut, he had always known that his false sense of predatory bravery would be upended by a beast far more aggressive and bloodthirsty than he could ever be. He would have never guessed that it would be a deinonychus trying to gnaw his throat out, but so it goes, he thought.

Fate had lined this moment up for him at birth, and every decision he had ever made had led him to this point, to a dinosaur frothing in his face.

Xavier ground his teeth together and hissed at the snarling beast. Blood dripped onto his skin from the creature's snaking tongue. Xavier growled in disgust and pushed the deinonychus's head back. The deinonychus's teeth slid further into Xavier's fingers as he struggled to keep the jaws open. He could feel the bones in his fingers being sawed into, but he held fast. He didn't care if he lost the fingers, or even his hands; he wouldn't let this animal take his life. He wasn't going to die in the jaws of some feral beast.

Xavier wasn't a spiritual man, but as he stared down the deinonychus's gaping throat, he felt he understood more of his life than he had ever known. From the day he was born, he was destined for this exact moment. The spirit of the deinonychus and his own were forever entwined, coiling around each other and meeting at this single point, tangled in the mud and fighting for their lives. Fear penetrated him, but his was the soul of a warrior. He refused to die as prey.

"Animal," Xavier spat.

Xavier felt the deinonychus anchored to his chest; its toe claws were hooked through his flak vest, scratching his stomach. The toes bulged and writhed, but wouldn't dislodge.

Xavier started to rock from left to right, shifting the weight of the predator. The deinonychus hissed and swiped its claws through his jacket. Xavier snarled and used the deinonychus's weight to roll onto his side.

The deinonychus rolled onto its back with Xavier straddling on top of it. The claws were still hooked into his vest, and the deinonychus began to kick wildly to get out from under him, but it couldn't free itself. Xavier was thrown back and forth, but he was attached firmly. They were stuck.

Xavier fell onto the deinonychus and drove his elbow into its throat. The deinonychus squealed and snapped at his face. Xavier

leaned away and reached for his machete while keeping his weight on the dinosaur's throat. He could see the desperation in its eyes, could feel the panic swimming through its soul.

Xavier sneered and puffed out his chest. He swore he could see a realization in the flickering eyes of the deinonychus as he raised the machete above its head. There was an intelligence in this animal that he would have never thought possible.

Staring into the eyes of his fate, Xavier brought the machete down with a *whack*, and the dinosaur went limp. The legs twitched beneath him. Thick blood drained from the stump of the carnivore's neck. Xavier never took his eyes from the deinonychus's own. He held the feathered crown in his hands, lifted it above his head, and felt the hot fluid drain over his skin. Fingers of blood ran through his hair.

Xavier closed his eyes against the stream and howled like a beast. There was no honor to the kill; he was the better predator, and for that he was rewarded with life.

"Dude...what the fuck?"

Xavier opened his eyes and saw Eli and Miller standing before him. They stared in shock, jaws slack and eyes wide.

"Jesus, man," Eli said. "You better cook that first."

"Salmonella," Miller stated.

Xavier tried to pull away from the deinonychus, but it clung to him in a deathly embrace. Scowling, Xavier chopped the machete through the creature's toes and dislodged himself. The talons stuck from his vest like thorns terminating in bloody stumps. Xavier tugged them out, looped them in his dog tags, and stuck feathers into the oozing flesh. He thumped his chest proudly and smiled at Eli and Miller. His eyes were wild with energy.

"I feel good," He said. "Come on, let's find the others."

"What, is there booze in that thing's blood?" Eli asked. Xavier and Miller brushed past him and entered the fog. Chasing after them, he shouted, "'Cause if there is, I want a sip! Just one! Just 'cause! Just so I can tell Gerald I did it!"

Logan wished Gerald was there.

Disoriented by the fog, Logan had lost Gerald and ended up with a deinonychus on his chest. His fingers laced around the deinonychus's neck, holding the frenzied jaws away. It bit at his nose, clicking its teeth. Saliva dripped from its maw and mingled

with Logan's sweat. His knife was lost in the marshy turf. Sand rubbed the back of his neck raw. He grasped for his knife as the deinonychus's hissing mixed with the voices that swirled through his slurried mind.

Voices, foreign and familiar, screamed from within.

Fuck up fuck up and die die die deserving death die shit scum

"Shut up!" Logan's voice twisted, "*Shut the fuck up!*"

The deinonychus writhed in Logan's grip. It slashed his forearm, raking deep wounds in his roped flesh. Logan reached for the knife, wet sand sliding beneath his fingertips. The deinonychus lunged and bit his nose, shearing off the tip. Pain exploded through his skull. Blood ran in hot rivulets down his screaming face. The voices were as vicious as the predator feasting on his severed flesh.

Deserving die deserving deserving death deserve death die

The hateful, spitting voices of his friends.

Freak bastard shit shithead shitscum scum shit die die die

"God, shut up!" Logan screamed at the deinonychus, "Shut up!"

Logan could feel his own blood suffocating him. He was going to be smothered to death by the weight of his own ebbing life force. He watched as the deinonychus swallowed the tip of his nose and he felt a burst of violent hatred. He dug his fingers further into the deinonychus's throat and felt for its windpipe. He squeezed, trying to crush the dinosaur's airway.

The deinonychus kicked him in the stomach, nearly piercing his flak vest. His free hand continued to roam the barren sand for respite. The voices became articulated and relentless.

Gerald's dying shit scum your fault always your fault all your fault

"Die! Die, goddammit!"

Logan's fingers met something gnarled, sharp, and heavy. He grasped the object and swung it into the side of the deinonychus's head. The rock connected with a sharp, splintering *crack* and the deinonychus shrieked with demented horror. The deinonychus collapsed beside him, shaking and spasming.

Logan crouched over the creature, blood dripping down from the rock over his knuckles. He felt a pang of guilt when he saw the animal's face; it was partially caved in, and crimson jelly from its split eye dripped into its seizing jaws.

Toxic air filled Logan's hollow body. His arms rose above his head. The rock was clutched between his hands.

The voices seethed malevolence.

*Do it do it you want to do it kill kill kill do it kill slaughter maim
maim mom*

With your bare fucking hands.

His arms quivered. He wanted to bludgeon the voices from his skull, crack his own forehead open and pry the voices out like the insects they were, clicking across his bones, filling his mind with sludge. He had attempted to subdue the voices with drugs and liquor, but that only slurred their words.

The weaker Logan became, the stronger the voices grew. Gerald tried to help him see this, but there were some things Gerald would never understand. He didn't have insects whispering from behind his ears, skittering across his thoughts.

*Spawn of satan do it demon devil do it do it **do it!***

The jagged edges of the rock bit his palm. The poor animal struggled through the throes of death beneath him. After a second of listening to the silence, Logan dropped the rock beside the deinonychus and climbed to his feet. He staggered around until he found his M40.

Logan approached the deinonychus, raised the rifle, and shot it in the head. The deinonychus was instantly freed of its suffering. Logan felt deflated; the adrenaline drained from his body. The act of mercy had left him feeling deprived.

Fucking pathetic, Logan.

Fucking pathetic.

The voice of his father. It was a voice he had heard many times while lying in his bunk, listening to his friends laugh and converse. They could seek escape from their personal burdens, but there was none for Logan. His tormentors were fully fleshed within him. He would never be free. Maybe not even in death, for all he knew. These demons were too strong to ever leave him.

Dissatisfied, the voices fell silent and slithered back into the recesses of his mind like coiled serpents. Logan exhaled and listened to the momentary silence for a sign of his missing friends. Footsteps were approaching, thudding across the sand and splashing through mud.

Logan took aim as a shadow began to take shape in the fog. The silhouette sharpened, and details emerged. When Logan saw the pearls of Gerald's smile, a cigarette hanging from his muddy lips, he had to stifle a relieved sigh.

"I lost ya!" Gerald shouted. "I saw a couple of those bird lizards and got 'em like shootin' fish in a barrel."

Logan lowered the rifle and tilted his head at the bashed deinonychus. Gerald whistled in approval.

"Very nice," he said. "Sort of old school, but I can dig it. Have you seen the others?"

"Over here!" Miller yelled. Three more shapes emerged from the fog.

Gerald turned to the fog and shouted, "It's about time you guys got here! What were you doing, taking a piss?"

Logan's jaw fell open.

The shadows were sprinting towards Gerald.

Logan screamed and a trio of deinonychus pounced from the fog, onto Gerald. The deinonychus sank their claws and teeth into Gerald's limbs and dragged him howling through the mud. Logan and Gerald screamed each other's names. Logan sprinted after the fleeing silhouettes, but they were too fast.

The mud sucked Logan down to his knees. He kicked and fought towards Gerald's body. They were all mired in the muck. Logan tried to aim his M40 at the deinonychus thrashing in the marsh, but he couldn't get a clear shot. Gerald's screams filled his head. The voices returned to the forefront of his mind.

Gone gone gone forever gone away gone away

"Stop," Logan cried. He reached for Gerald's hand. "Please!"

"Help!" Gerald screamed. His face was twisted in pain.

The three deinonychus splashed mud from their feathers. They slashed Gerald with their claws and snapped their jaws over his shoulders. Gerald cried out and his eyes pinched shut. Further away, the other men were sloshing through water towards them. Logan kept crawling closer until he was able to thread his fingers through Gerald's.

Help help die help kill kill Gerald help kill Gerald

A deinonychus snapped its jaws over Logan and Gerald's clutched hands. Logan shouted and lost his grip. A cacophony of screams filled Logan's head. He scrambled after Gerald, slipping through the mud, slicing his hands on submerged sticks and stones. Logan's last image of Gerald, pearly teeth in a screaming face with bright blue eyes alight with fear, was burned into his mind.

Logan howled as he watched Gerald and the deinonychus vanish in the mist, trailed by his friend's screams. Logan climbed out of the mud and crawled through the trail left in Gerald's wake.

"I'm sorry," Logan cried. "I'm sorry, Gerald!"

Fucking. Pathetic.

Logan's head dropped and cold mud kissed his forehead. Seconds passed, and he was pulled from the mud. The world was a nightmare. The voices contorted reality; sensory overload. Logan couldn't find his own thoughts in the slurry. Xavier and Miller were unrecognizable. They hovered over him, snapped their fingers, shouting mutely.

Nothing was louder than the voices.

Nothing.

"Fuck, I think he's shell-shocked," Miller said.

"What happened?" Xavier asked. "Where's Gerald?"

At the mention of Gerald, reality struck Logan like an icy wave. He bolted upright and shouted, "They took him! They took him! The dinosaurs, they took him! He's gone!"

"Woah, slow down!" Miller said, "Which way?"

"This way, come on, this way, this way!" Logan sputtered. He scrambled to his feet, reclaimed his rifle, and sprinted after Gerald's trail in the mud. Xavier and Miller stared, shocked.

"I think that's the most I've ever heard out've him," Eli muttered. They ran after Logan's blurred shape, back into the fog, towards the

echoing screams.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – REUNITED

The forest along the river bank was sparse and serene. Exotic birds cawed and cried shrilly throughout the tree tops, and herbivorous dinosaurs rumbled from further downstream. Thick-bodied palm trees supported the dense canopy like the columns of a primitive civilization, and clusters of taro plants with leaves like emerald elephant ears covered the caked sand of the forest floor.

Intense sunlight poured through the gaps between the jagged palm fronds and made the crawling ghosts of mist shine gold. There were no signs of the Father Tyrannosaurus in the peaceful forest, but that did nothing to slow Ryan's heartbeat.

Throughout their hike, Ryan's constant anticipation of the tyrannosaur's pounding footsteps had kept his heart tied to a live wire. He was wary of the jungle that grew thick and wild further inland for fear of unseen predators slinking through the undergrowth. He still didn't know what had attacked him the night before, and that terrified him more than the tyrannosaurus ever could.

If he heard the tyrannosaurus's bombastic approach, he would at least be able to flee, but if the creature that had pounced him last night attacked again, there was no guarantee that he would walk away from it alive. It made any previous fear of Viet Cong seem petty in comparison.

Ryan found that his paranoia was making him move faster, so he

slowed down so Andrei could catch up. The starving young scientist carried his intoxication like a bag of cement. He scraped his bare, blistered feet through the sand and clawed at the sores festering on his forearm. Ryan scratched his own forearm and looked away.

Leon walked beside Ryan, watching the forest with pallid eyes. Ryan wanted to probe Leon for his thoughts, see how he was holding up, but there were more dire matters to discuss. He cleared his throat and glanced at Andrei.

"We were attacked last night," Ryan said.

"You don't say," Andrei huffed. "That happens a lot here."

Ryan grunted, unamused. "Do you think you could tell me what I was attacked by?"

"I *am* a scientist," Andrei grumbled. His tongue ran across his crusted lips. "Have at it."

"Alright," Ryan said. "We were walking through the forest late last night. It was really, really quiet. Unnaturally quiet, like everything just went silent. I couldn't see or hear any animals, and when I...got separated from my team, I heard breathing and got pounced on."

Andrei's face hardened.

"Go on..."

"Whatever attacked me was fast and strong. Really strong; strong enough it was able to drag me faster than any of my men could run. It looked like it was covered in feathers, and it was big, but not as big as the T. rex. Maybe ten or eight feet tall. And the entire time I was being dragged, it didn't make a sound until it got shot. It made the most horrifying sound I've ever heard after that. It was unreal."

Andrei hurried his pace and stole a look at the denser forest. Ryan and Leon shared uncertain eye contact.

"What's wrong?" Ryan asked, watching Andrei closely. "What was I attacked by?"

"Did you get bitten?" Andrei asked, turning on his heel.

"What? Why?"

"Did you get bitten or *not*?!" Andrei snapped.

"No!" Ryan said. He gripped his rifle. "I mean, not really. I got bit, but I don't think it drew blood. I'll be fine."

"Let me see," Andrei demanded. "*Now*."

"Alright, alright," Ryan said. He unlaced his boot and pulled the sock down, revealing a semi-circle of bite marks on his calf. Rust spots of blood speckled his skin. Andrei put his hands on his head

and turned away, pacing.

"That's bad," Andrei muttered. "That's really, *really* bad."

"What, is it venomous?" Leon asked.

"No-he's been *marked*," Andrei said. He moved his head frantically, trying to watch the surrounding forest. Ryan felt his mouth go dry. His palms were sweating.

"What do you mean, 'marked'?" Ryan asked.

Andrei took a deep breath and turned to face Ryan.

"You were attacked by a utahraptor," Andrei said. "They're a close relative of deinonychus and velociraptor, but much bigger. About ten feet tall, twenty feet long. They're covered in feathers that they use as camouflage to hide in the undergrowth. Ambush predators.

"To my knowledge, there's a pack of four in this valley, and they're the most intelligent and efficient carnivorous dinosaurs here. If they lose their prey but draw blood, they'll track the prey animal every night until they catch it. You've bled, they have your scent, and now we're all in danger because they won't stop until they find you. You're *marked*."

"Why didn't it just kill me?" Ryan asked. He felt dizzy.

"They're...unusual." Andrei swept the hair from his eyes. "They disembowel their prey. Take the digestive track while their prey is still alive and leave it for dead. Sometimes they take the entire body, but they have a preference. I'm not sure why, and I haven't made any further attempts to find out, either. You can't blame me for keeping my distance."

Ryan receded within himself. His mind played images of being eaten alive from the inside out, his entrails dragged out like lengths of wet, pink rope. The thought nearly gave him shock. Ryan had always been afraid of being mutilated or eviscerated by a mortar or a mine, but the thought of an animal tugging the organs out of his body was too much. Knowing that there was a creature out there, stalking his scent, put cold sheets of sweat on his skin. He was even more horrified knowing that his men might run into the same fate.

Rustling foliage distracted Ryan from his thoughts. He whipped his rifle towards the sound in unison with Leon. Andrei cowered behind them.

"Movement, three o'clock and coming fast," Leon said. He peered down the barrel of his rifle at the thick foliage in the forest further inland, beyond the trunks of the palm trees.

Ryan stared. Something was charging through the forest, tearing through the vegetation. More animals were trampling after it. Ryan knelt with Leon behind a gathering of elephant ears and held his breath. Andrei curled into a trembling ball behind them. The palm plants shook across the clearing from them, and they heard panting respirations. Ryan's pulse throbbed in his ears. His finger curled around the trigger.

A striped green and black animal burst from the foliage, and Leon cried out in shock.

"Logan!" Leon exclaimed.

Logan was deaf to Ryan and Leon. He sprinted past, wide eyed and manic. Ryan and Leon leapt to their feet and grabbed him by the arms, pulling him backward. Ryan said, "Easy, Logan, easy, easy! What's going on?"

Logan fought against their grip, swinging his sniper rifle. Delirious cries were strangled in his throat. His words were incoherent. Leon's eyebrows lifted, and Ryan continued his attempts to hold Logan in place.

"Logan, calm down! What's wrong? Where are the others? Where's Gerald?"

"They took him!" Logan shrieked, "Let me go, they got him!"

"What? What got him?" Ryan asked. "What happened to Gerald?"

"He's gone!" Logan cried. He broke free and followed a trail of footprints through the sand, sprinting deeper into the jungle.

"Logan!" Ryan shouted.

"Gerald's gone?" Leon muttered.

"Who the hell was that?" Andrei asked.

"Who the hell are *you*?"

The trio turned and saw Miller's rifle aimed at Andrei's chest. Xavier and Eli stood on either side of him, rifles raised. Ryan stepped in front of Andrei and put his hand up.

"Lower your weapons," Ryan said. "His name's Andrei. He saved us."

"Sounds like a Ruskie to me," Miller said, scowling. "Are you a pinko commie, Andrei? Are you responsible for these dinosaurs and missing Green Beret and all the insane shit that's going on here?"

Andrei raised his hands meekly. "Just let me explain--"

"Shut up," Eli snapped. "You know how many fuckin' lizard-birds we had to kill to get here?"

"I said, lower your weapons," Ryan repeated. "That's an order!"

“What does he know?” Xavier shot back.

“He knows everything,” Ryan said. “He’s our ticket home. We have an evac on the way because of him, and he’s going to give us every answer we need, even if we have to pry each one from his drug-filled skull. Now do what I say and lower your goddamned weapons!”

“Wait, *what?*” Andrei said.

Miller ground his teeth for a few seconds, looked from Ryan to Andrei, and lowered the rifle with an irritated grunt. Xavier lowered his as well, but Eli kept his shotgun angled at Andrei.

“Now, Eli!” Ryan barked.

Eli spit tobacco juice and lowered his shotgun.

“You’re lucky my boss says you can live, pinko, or else you’d be splattered on that tree behind you.”

Ryan stared holes through Eli’s head, and then turned to Xavier.

“What happened, Xavier? Where’s Gerald, and what happened to Logan?”

“Some small dinosaurs, feathery lizard things, took Gerald,” Xavier said. “Logan’s lost it.”

“What dinosaurs are we dealing with?” Ryan asked, turning to Andrei.

“D-deinonychus,” Andrei said. “Pack hunters. Nasty arboreal animals. They like to have half the pack on the ground, herding their prey, and the other half up in the tree tops, pouncing down on them. They can easily disembowel prey with the sickle-claws on their toes.”

“Yeah, well, half their pack is dead now,” Miller said. “So what’s the rest of the pack doing with our friend?”

“If they have your friend, then they’re dragging him away from the rest of his ‘herd’,” Andrei said. “They’ll keep running until they get away. You ‘ll have to run faster if you want to save him.”

Eli narrowed his eyes at Andrei. “No shit, Stalin.”

“Eli-,” Ryan was interrupted by a terrible, distant scream. Gerald.

CHAPTER NINETEEN – ASCENSION

On the southern end of the valley, where the jungles gave way to

floodplains of elephant grass and sparse palm trees, Sergei and the Russians were dragging their feet through water-logged soil. The somber men had been humping it through the valley since Aleksandr's death, and the oppressive environment was taking its toll. The sun burned through the blue sheet of sky, boiling the air around them, and clouds of buzzing mosquitoes swirled around their heads like smoke.

The endless hike rendered their legs like a meat grinder and the wet turf sucked down their boots. Aleksandr's unspeakable demise hung in their air of silence. They were tired of its weight, of the endless wilderness, and of each other. Any shared words had been terse.

"It looks like this delta ends in a mile," Tolstoy murmured. He studied the distant tree line through the scope of his Dragunov rifle. "If the map Viktor gave us is accurate, we find the Americans by nightfall."

Nikita grunted. Tolstoy scowled at him.

"Let me guess; you want to show up with offerings of peace," Tolstoy said.

"I'm not as lustful for bloodshed as you, Tolstoy," Nikita shot back. "An eye for an eye leaves the world blind."

"Fool," Tolstoy growled. He turned to Sergei. "And what about you? Are you going to apologize to the Americans for Aleksandr's blood staining their hands? Are you going to share your feelings with them and hope they understand?"

Sergei looked at his captain. Aleksandr's horrendous, mutilated visage stared back.

"I will make them suffer, sir," Sergei said. "I promise."

"Good," Tolstoy said. He returned his attention to the distant forest. "You aren't a lost cause like Nikita."

"Tolstoy--" Nikita's voice rose.

Tolstoy cut him off with an upturned hand. They were silent. Droning insects surrounded them. The heat was stifling. Nikita wiped the sweat from his face and swatted at mosquitoes. He started to pant through his teeth.

"*Tolstoy!*" Nikita barked.

Then, he heard it. The approaching thrum of engines rising and falling like a mechanical heartbeat. His eyes widened with recognition. The sound increased in volume.

"*Down!*" Tolstoy hissed.

They splashed into the puddles on their stomachs. Nikita groaned in disgust.

The sound of the thumping rotor blades filled the floodplains. A small Huey helicopter crested the distant tree tops and swam through the clear blue expanse of sky like a lone cicada. The helicopter, the Father Vulture, cast its shadow onto the men as it passed over.

Tolstoy climbed to his knees and parted the thick elephant grass. The men watched as the Father Vulture vanished beyond the fringe of the jungle canopy, heading north. Tolstoy clenched his jaw and smiled.

"We're close," he muttered. "So close."

The appearance of the Father Vulture stirred a deep fear in Sergei's stomach. He had never seen an enemy craft, and the sudden reveal cemented the reality of the war. The Americans weren't just phantoms hunting his friends at night; they really had a base. There was an actual enemy encampment, teeming with men who wanted nothing more than to empty their lead into Sergei's body.

He began to tremble. All of his rigorous training was rendered moot. This wasn't practice; this was war, and Sergei was more aware of his fragile mortality than ever before.

Tolstoy stood and pulled Sergei to his feet.

"Come, let's follow the hornet's trail back to the nest," Tolstoy said. He looked to the southern horizon and froze. Between the opposing walls of the valley, a large silhouette was suspended in the open air.

Sergei and Nikita peered at the gliding figure. It appeared to be as large as a fighter jet, but with wings like that of a bat's. A long, thin head swiveled on a lengthy neck like a periscope, scanning the valley below. The creature listed on the breeze like a kite, then banked low.

Sergei wondered if it might be some sort of American plane; he didn't know much about the Americans' technology, but he had heard it was space-age.

Those thoughts left when he saw the wings flap once, with a tremendous *whump* of air, and the shape ascended higher.

"Down!" Tolstoy hissed, and the men immediately dropped back down.

The creature eclipsed the sun and draped shade across the floodplain. Sergei hugged the earth. The shadow swept overhead

and a gust of wind whipped the elephant grass into rippling waves. Sergei flinched and pulled himself further into the embrace of the marsh. Panic replaced his thoughts. He meekly met Tolstoy's eyes and saw the same fear reflected. The men remained mute until the animal had passed.

Tolstoy pulled his head from the slough and gazed at the waving grass. There was silence.

"What the hell was that?" Nikita whispered.

"*Shhh*," Tolstoy hissed.

A second and third animal swooped low, thrusting wind against their backs. Sergei held his breath. The animals circled above the floodplains like a black pinwheel in the soft blue sky. The sunlight glowed through the animals' leathery wing membranes, illuminating vibrant red blood vessels.

The muscular bodies of the creatures were covered in a scraggly black down, and their reptilian heads were tipped with lethal spearing beaks. Each animal was as large as a biplane, with wingspans nearly forty-feet across.

Sergei couldn't comprehend the monster he was witnessing, a type of pterosaur known as a Quetzalcoatlus. These flying reptiles were the largest airborne creatures of all time.

"*Dragons*," Nikita whispered. "Fucking *dragons*!"

"*Shut up*," Tolstoy hissed. "They'll hear you. Just stay low and move slowly. We'll be okay if we can get to the jungle. It's only a mile."

"Only a mile, he says," Nikita whispered, "A mile with fucking *dragons*!"

"Just shut up and crawl, comrade," Tolstoy growled.

After a moment of hesitation, the men began the arduous crawl on their hands and knees. Despite the overbearing layers of heat and humidity, the water that seeped from the marsh was frigid. It numbed their arms and legs. Their joints creaked like rusted hinges. Their rifles quickly became mired in the mud, and they fought to tug themselves free. Tolstoy slung his Dragunov over his shoulder and let it drag through the muck. He gazed warily at the sky. The trio of quetzalcoatlus circled with the slow menace of a guillotine above their heads. The only sounds from the creatures were their infrequent wingbeats.

The Russians were bumbling mules compared to the graceful creatures; their limbs sloshed noisily through water and the soil *squelched* beneath them. Nikita huffed like a dying bison. Tolstoy

wished he could leave his slow-moving sympathizer, the bleeding-heart weakling. He felt ashamed for these desires, as Nikita was his oldest comrade.

Tolstoy had known Nikita since the Great War. He could never leave Nikita behind, but his instinctive urge to escape was overpowering. If Tolstoy made a run for it, he and Sergei might have a chance at survival, but there was no guarantee they would make it to the forest in time, and even if they did, it would doom Nikita. There was no sensible escape other than to slowly suffer through the gnawing dread.

The ring of beasts tightened their formation above. The shadows cast by their wingtips sliced through the sun and flickered across the backs of the men. Shivers racketed through Tolstoy's spine. The warmth of his blood was being drained by the water. Frost crept through his extremities. The water smelt fetid and rotten, penetrating his fortitude. He stifled his retching.

Tolstoy looked down and saw a leech pulsing on his forearm like a slick black tumor. Repulsed, Tolstoy ripped away the worm and saw his blood ooze thick from the hickey left behind.

They had only gone thirty feet, and at the pace they were going, it would be hours before they met the fringe of jungle. Tolstoy didn't care. All he wanted was to seek shelter in the dark confines of the forest like a rat hiding from a hawk.

A quetzalcoatlus honked overhead, a mournful foghorn. It was so deep and resonant that Tolstoy could feel the water trembling around him. The Quetzalcoatlus banked lower, circled the three men, and landed with a gentle *splash*. The three Russians became statues.

The quetzalcoatlus walked through the elephant grass on all fours with its wings folded like stilts against its body. The creature was easily twenty feet tall. The enormous animal swiveled its head from side to side, peering into the grass with the piercing and emotionless eyes of a vulture. Tolstoy could feel himself growing manic with terror. The quetzalcoatlus's limbs swished through the water and grass a few feet away.

Snot swam through Tolstoy's knotted beard. He was numb; his mind had left him. He couldn't conjure the subtlest movement of his limbs, couldn't even think of moving. In the face of this monstrosity, he had been turned to stone by shock. He hardly had the capacity to notice the splashes from the other two

quetzalcoatlus as they landed nearby.

Sergei crawled around to Tolstoy. Tolstoy watched Sergei's lips twitch to form words that he couldn't read.

The quetzalcoatlus brushed through the grass so softly that the blades seemed to whisper against its skin. The animal's breathing was wet and fluttering, like damp paper blowing down an alleyway.

Sergei's eyes spoke more to Tolstoy than words ever could. Tolstoy couldn't find any thoughts; he was consumed by his adrenaline.

He hardly felt the first impact.

The first quetzalcoatlus swung its beak down like an axe and punched a hole through Tolstoy's back, slamming him into the earth. Everybody began to scream. Tolstoy felt the beak rip out, and torrents of blood drained from the gaping wound left behind.

Without a sound, the quetzalcoatlus jabbed its beak in and out of Tolstoy's body, punching holes through his torso, destroying organs, snapping his bones into splinters. Tolstoy vomited thick and red; his skull was empty, screaming as he was lifted by his neck.

Tolstoy's Dragunov rifle landed in front of Sergei. Sergei couldn't process what was happening. His eyes were stretched open. He grabbed the Dragunov, but he couldn't think to use it. Tolstoy's screams filled Sergei's head. He was drenched in his comrade's blood.

Sergei was back in Spetsnaz training, frozen beneath barbed wire in the fetal position in a trench filled with pig's blood as bullets screamed overhead. Sergei's mind slipped further into his body.

The other quetzalcoatlus began to spear its beak through Tolstoy's body. Sergei's mentor no longer screamed; he gurgled blood like a choking infant. Scarlett foam poured through his lips.

Sergei watched as the two quetzalcoatlus opened their beaks, and their snaking tongues slithered out. Each tongue was as long as a python, with thorny protrusions like the quills of a porcupine. Sergei stared helplessly as the tongues crawled over Tolstoy's arms and constricted.

A fresh groan of agony rose from Tolstoy as the quills buried into his flesh. The quetzalcoatlus jerked their heads back, pulling Tolstoy's limbs. His joints and bones popped with a sickening wetness. Tolstoy's screams were reawakened with vivid clarity. His eyes shone white against the burgundy that covered his face. Sergei stared through his trembling fingers.

With a horrendous scream, Tolstoy's arms were pulled apart by the quetzalcoatlus' tongues. They swallowed his limbs whole, then repeated the process with his legs. Tolstoy's screams dropped into a breathless wheezing.

Sergei sat in a puddle of blood, shaking violently. He threw up into his lap and watched the horror with an empty head. He couldn't hear Nikita yelling, or the quetzalcoatlus snorting as they ate. All he could do was look into Tolstoy's pleading eyes and whimper pitifully.

Nikita screamed at Sergei, but he knew the boy was deaf. He had seen it before in Berlin, when he and Tolstoy were teenagers. As Nikita had done with Tolstoy decades ago, he took Sergei by the hand and dragged him away from the crimson pools like a lost child.

They ran across the floodplains, slogging through the mud. One of the quetzalcoatlus honked and shambled after them. The predator gained speed, leapt into the air, and took flight on powerful wing-beats.

Nikita turned and sprayed his AK-47, shredding the quetzalcoatlus's wing membranes. The quetzalcoatlus honked in surprise, staggered in the air, and crashed like a kite. Another quetzalcoatlus took flight and circled over them, ascending higher.

The quetzalcoatlus trumpeted and dove towards them, its beak aimed at Sergei's back. Nikita tackled Sergei into the ground and the quetzalcoatlus swept over them. The quetzalcoatlus banked to the left, soared higher, and circled towards them again.

Nikita took aim and fired his rifle at the speeding beast. The AK-47 peppered ammunition across the animal's beak, and it veered off to the left. Nikita followed the beast with his rifle and emptied his remaining ammunition into its flank.

The quetzalcoatlus honked frantically and soared away, following the first quetzalcoatlus to the safety beyond the jungle canopy. Nikita didn't stay to watch; he kept a vice grip on Sergei's wrist and dragged him into the jungle, to the sanctity of the claustrophobic darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY – GERALD

The world was a painful blur to Gerald Keyes.

A collage of foliage rushed over him like the current of an emerald river. Rocks snapped against his spine and his skull ricocheted off of tree roots. He bounced across the forest floor, howling in pain and desperation. His hands were sliced open by thorns and broken branches as he clawed desperately for something to stop his horrific passage.

Gerald strained to see his captors; a pair of deinonychus were dragging him by his ankles with their jaws, tugging him along the forest floor. Another pair of deinonychus trotted on either side of him, nipping at his grasping hands.

Gerald swung his fist at one of the deinonychus and it snapped its jaws over his wrist. Teeth needled into his carpal bones and he screamed. When he fell back down, he hit his head on a rock, and lights flashed behind his closed eyes. He couldn't take it any longer; he didn't know where the deinonychus were taking him, but he sure as hell wasn't going.

Gerald pulled his wrist from the deinonychus, but the jaws wouldn't let go. He tugged again and the deinonychus stumbled over its own feet. Gerald pounded his fist on the predator's snout as it snarled and staggered.

The other two deinonychus dragging Gerald hissed irritably and slowed down. One of the deinonychus snapped at his neck, but he rolled away. He punched the first deinonychus on the snout and it let go of his wrist with a growl. Gerald swung his elbow into the animal's eye and it leapt backwards, yelping.

Another deinonychus slashed Gerald across the back, and he screamed like a wounded animal. He slammed the animal's jaws shut in his hands, and shoved its head into the soil. The deinonychus that was still dragging him growled and started

climbing up his body, scraping his torso with its claws. The deinonychus climbed onto Gerald's chest and snapped at his cheek. He grabbed the dinosaur's neck in both hands and bit into its throat, pulling it close so the claws couldn't reach his face or neck. The animal shrieked and clawed at Gerald's shoulders, kicking his flak vest.

Gerald's mouth filled with hot, metallic blood. He choked and spat it out of the corners of his mouth. He squeezed the animal's airways shut and ground his teeth in deeper. The tendons snapped between his molars. The deinonychus yowled in agony and began to struggle less.

Gerald couldn't see through the sheets of red spilling over his eyes. He crunched cartilage between his molars and tugged his head back, gnawing the animal's throat open. The deinonychus went limp on top of him.

The other three deinonychus stood frozen. Their eyes flicked at each other while they remained in a rigid attack posture, tails held high and heads lowered with arms spread open, claws exposed. Gerald shoved off the dead dinosaur and stumbled to his feet. He beat his chest and howled at the animals, spitting blood. The deinonychus looked at him, and then at each other, and they hissed lowly.

Gerald felt like the superior predator until one of the animals pounced onto him, scything its claws into his flak vest. Gerald cried out and fell against a tree trunk, winding the deinonychus.

The other two deinonychus charged, going for Gerald's legs. Gerald threw off the deinonychus that was on his chest, and then kicked one of the charging animals in the throat. The kicked animal yowled and fell back, but the second charging deinonychus took Gerald's kneecap and buried its talons into the bone.

Gerald was overwhelmed, but he was possessed by his adrenaline. He took his knife from its sheath and slashed the deinonychus on his knee across the face. The deinonychus screeched and staggered backwards.

Gerald's knee crumpled beneath his weight and he buckled momentarily. He grabbed the deinonychus by the tail and pumped his blade in and out of the animal's thigh.

The deinonychus shrieked in agony and fell at Gerald's feet. The animal tried to crawl away, but Gerald stepped over it and stomped it with his boots until the creature's skull was pulped underfoot.

The other two deinonychus crept towards him.

Gerald brandished the knife and shouted, "Come on, you ugly little bastards! Come on! I'll make fillets outta ya! I'll gut ya like trout! You know how many men I've killed? I don't give a fuck about some goddamned *birds!*"

The two remaining deinonychus looked down at their dead pack mates and back at Gerald. They seemed to be sizing him up with their piercing hawk-eyes. The animals seemed agitated; one kept looking back and forth, and the other wouldn't stop moving its feet.

Gerald licked the blood from his knife and spat at the small carnivores. He was nearly delirious from the pain and rush of adrenaline, but he didn't care. He would kill them with his bare hands if he had to, kill every goddamn animal in the valley if need be. He wasn't scared of some overgrown chickens.

With a whimper, the two deinonychus turned and sprinted deeper into the jungle. Gerald swung his knife and shouted, "Go on, then! I'll make omelets out of yer kids! Mmm, mmm, fucking delicious!"

Gerald took a step forward, but his leg buckled and he fell face-flat in the dirt. He dragged himself up the side of a tree and wiped the blood from his face; he was bathed in it. The most blood he had ever seen was from a Viet Cong he had shot in the throat...it had jetted out of the man like a spigot. At least then he hadn't been close; he had the comfort of watching it from nearly a half mile away.

This was different. Logan wasn't there; Gerald was alone and vulnerable. The creeping fear of the silence that pervaded the jungle made Gerald go weak. He hugged himself against the tree and he began to sweat.

He had to find the others. *Fast.*

Gerald hopped a few feet on his good leg and fell beneath the undergrowth. He pushed himself upright and crawled towards the next closest tree, a fat and twisted-trunked ficus. His blood was like sludge in his veins. His heart was lethargic. He wanted a cigarette.

Priorities, he thought.

Gerald took a crooked cigarette from the pack in his pocket and lit it. He took a long drag, puffing small clouds of smoke, and his nerves began to soften. The jungle seemed relatively peaceful; no birds, no monkeys; no bugs, even. Just silence of the purest quality.

He could easily fall asleep, he was so tired. There was the possibility that he had a concussion, so he passed on that idea.

Instead, Gerald catalogued his thoughts.

Gerald decided he would wait until the pain in his knee faded away, and then he would start trekking north, to the mangrove forest. But what if the others were already gone? He would have to take that risk. It was better than waiting for something else to find him.

Why was it so quiet? He had never heard such silence; not since last night, when they first entered the jungle. That was when Ryan had been attacked by that...*thing*.

Gerald felt a flare of panic and quickly ushered it away with another puff of smoke. He shifted uncomfortably as he listened to the wind whistle through the palms trees, the crackling hiss of dry fronds rubbing against each other.

Gerald climbed to his feet and tested his weight on the knee; it hurt, but it would hold. He slowly hobbled through the forest towards the sound of the river, hoping to use it to backtrack towards the mangrove swamp, or at least the shore where Ryan and Leon had escaped the tyrannosaurus.

How far had those dinosaurs dragged him? It seemed like they had traversed miles within minutes. Blood slithered down the back of his throat, and he coughed. Tobacco and copper tasted like a bad combination. Would he get an infection from ingesting dinosaur blood? He didn't know much about anatomy, but he assumed it wasn't a smart move to swallow more than a pint of blood at a time.

Gerald chuckled. Eli would get a laugh out of that. Maybe he could pay him to try it, offer him a beer in return if they ever made it back to civilization. That was a foreign idea; a pipe dream in his scattered brain. He would be lucky to get home alive, let alone at all. He felt nauseous. Was that from a concussion, the blood in his gut, or his lack of it? How much blood had he even lost?

He stubbed the cigarette out on his jacket and flicked the butt. His next cigarette would be shared with Miller, if he could convince him to smoke. The tight-ass was too good for anything. A perfect poster-boy Christian, Gerald and Eli joked.

The silence of the forest crept through Gerald's mind like a threat. He found it deeply unsettling. He would give anything to hear Eli's slurred twang, Ryan's steady voice, Miller's rapport and Logan's mumbled confessions.

Gerald wondered how Logan was doing. Ever since their last

mission, the schizophrenia had been growing worse. Logan was probably lost without him. Gerald hoped that Logan was keeping it together. He longed for his friend's presence as badly as his next cigarette. God, he wanted another smoke, just to soothe his nerves. He paused.

Was that breathing he heard?

No, it couldn't be, it was just the wind.

A twig snapped like a starting gun, and Gerald stumbled into a run. His leg dragged behind him like a lead pipe. There was nowhere to hide; just towering tree trunks as far as he could see. If he could find a tree that was skinny enough, he could possibly climb it and take shelter in the understory canopy. Gerald half-hopped, half-limped towards the nearest tree. The silence tingled in his ears.

Very subtly, he heard a rumbling, resonant breath, like that of a horse, and the foliage exploded beside him.

Before Gerald could scream, a pair of jaws slammed shut over his throat and drove him beneath the vegetation. Pain exploded through his body as fangs sunk into his neck, shutting off his inhalations. The beast huffed softly. Damp air rushed over Gerald's face.

The utahraptor that was crouched on top of Gerald looked like a deinonychus, but nearly three times larger. The beast was covered in a blend of green, brown, and black feathers; earthy tones that made it blur against the surrounding forest like a mirage.

Gerald gaped like a suffocated fish. He was lost in the cold, hypnotic stare of the utahraptor's amber tiger-eyes. His hands brushed over the predator's silken feathers and warm, leathery skin. It was almost comforting, like the embrace of a lover. He felt himself fading into the utahraptor's warmth like a soft blanket.

The utahraptor was gentle as it sliced its claws through Gerald's jacket and shirt like tissue paper. His flesh tingled against the touch of its cold talons. It was almost exciting. He was delirious with shock.

Fiery pain spread through Gerald's gut as his abdomen was split open. Gerald screamed mutely and squirmed, but the utahraptor didn't notice his struggles. Gerald felt warm, wet snakes crawl over his waist. It was with abhorrent shock he realized that his intestines were slithering out of his gut.

Gerald kicked, but his legs met open air. The utahraptor purred softly and lapped up the blood from his neck. Gerald flailed against

the brushing tongue. His limbs were numb. His lungs were empty. As he fell into darkness, he heard a distant, echoing voice.

“Gerald!”

Logan!

Footsteps trampled closer. The utahraptor growled and lowered itself onto Gerald. The weight crushed his ribcage. The feathers on the utahraptor’s back stood straight up, creating a perfect mimicry of lush ferns and primitive foliage. The utahraptor cloaked Gerald in its wing-like arms and covered its head beside his. There was just enough of a gap between the feathers of the creature’s forearms for Gerald to see Logan’s panting face only a meter away.

Gerald’s hand crept towards his dropped knife. The jaws squeezed tighter; a warning. Gerald prayed Logan would find him, or at least escape before he met a similar fate.

“I swear I heard him this way,” Logan gasped. “He has to be here, he has to!”

“Everybody, fan out and look for cigarette butts,” Ryan said. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. The jungle was motionless around the group. Ryan tugged on his mask nervously. Andrei doubled over beside him, hacking and wheezing. Eli rolled his eyes. “You’d think a Russian’d know how to run,” he mumbled.

“You’re thinking of the French,” Miller said. “Russians are too drunk to run.”

“Fuck you both,” Andrei coughed.

Xavier anxiously scanned the forest. Ryan met his eyes and said, “You’ve noticed it too, haven’t you? How quiet it is?”

Xavier chewed his lip and nodded.

Ryan straightened up. “Be on your toes,” he said.

Everybody was quiet. Xavier studied the undergrowth for the slightest flicker of movement. His ears were pricked like a dog on a hunt. Ryan held his rifle and watched as Xavier paced around the clearing.

A breeze pushed through the humidity, dragging a whiff of copper to Xavier’s nostrils. He sniffed and narrowed his eyes. Crouching, he followed the scent to the center of the forest. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Everybody held their breath. Leon’s rifle shook in his hands.

Xavier narrowed his eyes at a patch of ferns that stood firm against the wind. He pointed his rifle at the cluster of ferns and

crept closer, the others following close behind.

The utahraptor tensed. Gerald could feel the predator's teeth clenching his skin. He had to act fast, or the animal would kill Xavier. He was sure of it. It didn't matter how much firepower was laid on the animal; it was too big, too powerful. It would have them all dead in seconds.

Gerald could feel the heartbeat of the predator against his chest, a powerful engine building energy. Gerald knew it was about to pounce; he could feel the muscles tightening beneath its warm, leathery underbelly. He had to do something.

Gerald's fingers brushed the handle of the knife, and the utahraptor looked menacingly into his eyes. Gerald wrapped his hand around the blade and the utahraptor's jaws tightened. Its claws dug into his skin.

With a burst of strength, he jammed the knife into the utahraptor's chest, sinking the blade between its ribs, straining with effort.

The utahraptor's eyes opened wide, and its steady breathing began to grow in volume with its stress. The pupils dug into Gerald's own. He felt a chill. The creature hissed lowly, a deep growl from within its chest.

The utahraptor jumped to its feet with an explosive howl, knocking Ryan and Xavier onto their backs. Gerald's horrific screams filled the air, drowning the shouts of the panicked men. Ryan and Xavier scrambled to their feet and swung their rifles up.

The utahraptor bellowed ferociously and stepped over Gerald, its arms spread wide like the wings of an eagle. The utahraptor's feathers bristled, and it seemed to double in size. It stretched its jaws and roared, shaking Ryan to his core. Gerald continued to scream and wail beneath it. Ryan saw shining intestines coiled over Gerald's gut and his eyes shot open.

Nobody moved.

"What are you waiting for?!" Eli hissed. "Roast that fucking turkey!"

"Not yet," Ryan said. The utahraptor's curved toe claw was poised over Gerald's throat. "If we shoot it, it's going to kill Gerald. Wait until it turns its back."

Logan's sniper rifle shook violently in his hands. He was fighting the voices in his head and the urge to attack. Gerald's agonized screams were an alarm in his head. The air buzzed with violent

energy.

Leon pulled out his rocket launcher, but Ryan shook his head. Leon glared back at Ryan and replaced the launcher with his rifle.

The utahraptor's golden eyes flicked across their faces, and it growled. Eli bared his teeth and growled back.

The utahraptor slowly crouched and held Gerald against its chest. Gerald howled and kicked his legs.

The utahraptor turned and sprinted into the jungle. "Now!" Ryan barked. The men chased after the utahraptor, unleashing a furious barrage of automatic fire at its backside. Bullets pecked at the utahraptor's body and it barked with rage.

Logan ran ahead of the others and bounded through the forest after the dinosaur, but it was too fast. The utahraptor moved through the forest with cunning agility, leaping over logs and roots that were hidden beneath the undergrowth. Logan quickly fell behind the animal, spitting and swearing at his inability to keep pace. He had lost sight of the predator as quickly as it had appeared.

Gerald fought wildly in the utahraptor's grasp, but his fists bounced off of its tough hide. His pain was excruciating; the constant rush of searing adrenaline was the only thing that kept him from passing out. He looked past the utahraptor and saw that the rest of the squad was long gone. Logan was nowhere to be seen. Gerald screamed and slammed his fists into the utahraptor's snout with mounting desperation.

With their pursuers gone, the utahraptor dropped Gerald onto the wide roots of a banyan tree. He barked in pain and rolled to his side. The utahraptor towered over him and snarled, claws flicking. Gerald curled and covered his head. The utahraptor shoved its snout in his face and sprayed red spit onto his skin.

Gerald knew he was dead. His mind was fading in and out of oblivion. There was no hope for his survival. The utahraptor was going to disembowel him and leave his corpse for the others to find. If he was lucky, it would kill him swiftly.

A screaming blur of green suddenly struck the utahraptor's neck and made it stumble aside. Gerald looked through his fingers and saw Logan wrapped around the utahraptor's neck. The beast tried to throw Logan off, but he held tight. Logan shouted and sliced his knife at the utahraptor's eye. The utahraptor raked its claws across his back, but he wouldn't let go.

The utahraptor roared so loudly that Gerald could feel the sound throughout his body. Logan roared back and shoved his knife deep into the utahraptor's eye. The utahraptor released the same twisted, distorted scream as the night before and threw Logan off.

Logan hit the trunk above Gerald's head and collapsed on top of him. Gerald held Logan tight, and they cowered beneath the wailing, angered beast.

Rifle fire tore through the foliage and struck the utahraptor's flank. Ryan rose above the cusp of a hill and opened fire. Leon and Xavier joined him, then Eli and Miller, until the utahraptor was lost in a storm of lead.

The utahraptor released one last dizzying howl and sprinted away, disappearing into the forest's depths like an apparition. Gerald's head spun, and he fainted in Logan's arms. Logan shook him and the others gathered around them.

"Gerald, wake up!" Logan shouted, "Wake up!"

"Give him some room," Xavier said. He took out his medical supplies and started pushing Gerald's innards back into the gaping wound. Logan stood and paced, muttering beneath his breath. Leon held him back. Andrei watched the panicked men from afar, a curious spectator. His eyes went hard when he saw Gerald's grievous injury.

"His guts are out, for god's sake," Logan cried. "What do we do?!"

"We'll get him back to Andrei's lab, and we'll wait for the evac," Ryan said. "He'll make it, won't he, Xavier?" His eyes gripped Xavier's like a vice. Xavier nodded grimly.

"Yeah, he'll make it," Xavier said. "Yeah. For sure."

Ryan thought of dog tags slick with warm blood in his hands. He hoped he would never experience that sensation again. If they made it back to the research station, they could hold a perimeter until the Father Vulture arrived. He hoped Gerald would make it that long.

"Leave him."

All eyes were on Andrei. There was a stunned silence. Eli quickly crossed the clearing towards him. Andrei held up his hands and backed away.

"The utahraptors are going to return as a full pack, and then we're all going to die," Andrei said. "If we leave him, we may have a chance of making it out of here alive; but we can't afford--"

Eli hit Andrei with a right hook to the temple and knocked him out-cold. Andrei collapsed in a heap beneath the undergrowth.

“Dammit Eli, we needed him to get back to the fucking lab!” Ryan yelled. “The sun’s going to set behind the mountains in half an hour, and then we’re going to have to do this in the dark! Then what? We’ll be lost!”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Eli laughed. “We could put a bullet in his head, and it’d be one less body to drag. Hell, it’d be room on the helicopter for Gerald to stretch his legs.”

“Well, now you have to carry him,” Ryan said. “Logan, Leon, carry Gerald. Miller and Xavier, get our sides. We’ve gotta get moving or else we won’t make it back in time for the helicopter to arrive.”

The howling calls of the utahraptor pack filled the valley like the encroaching nightfall. Ryan raised his rifle and shouted, “Double time, Vultures! Let’s move!”

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE – UTAHRAPTORS

By the time Vulture Squad found the research station, the sun had sought solace behind the mountains and the moon had risen to take its place. As the team came upon the clearing, Ryan faced the familiar gleaming skull in the sparkling black sea of sky above the research station’s pyramid roof. It horrified him to think that just the night before, he had stared at the same moon in blissful ignorance.

The world no longer made sense to Ryan. He sprinted across the clearing to the door of the research station, fervently glancing at the encroaching shadows of the forest.

“What is this place?” Xavier asked. “Is this what the Green Beret were looking for?”

“Worry about it later,” Ryan said. “Get inside!”

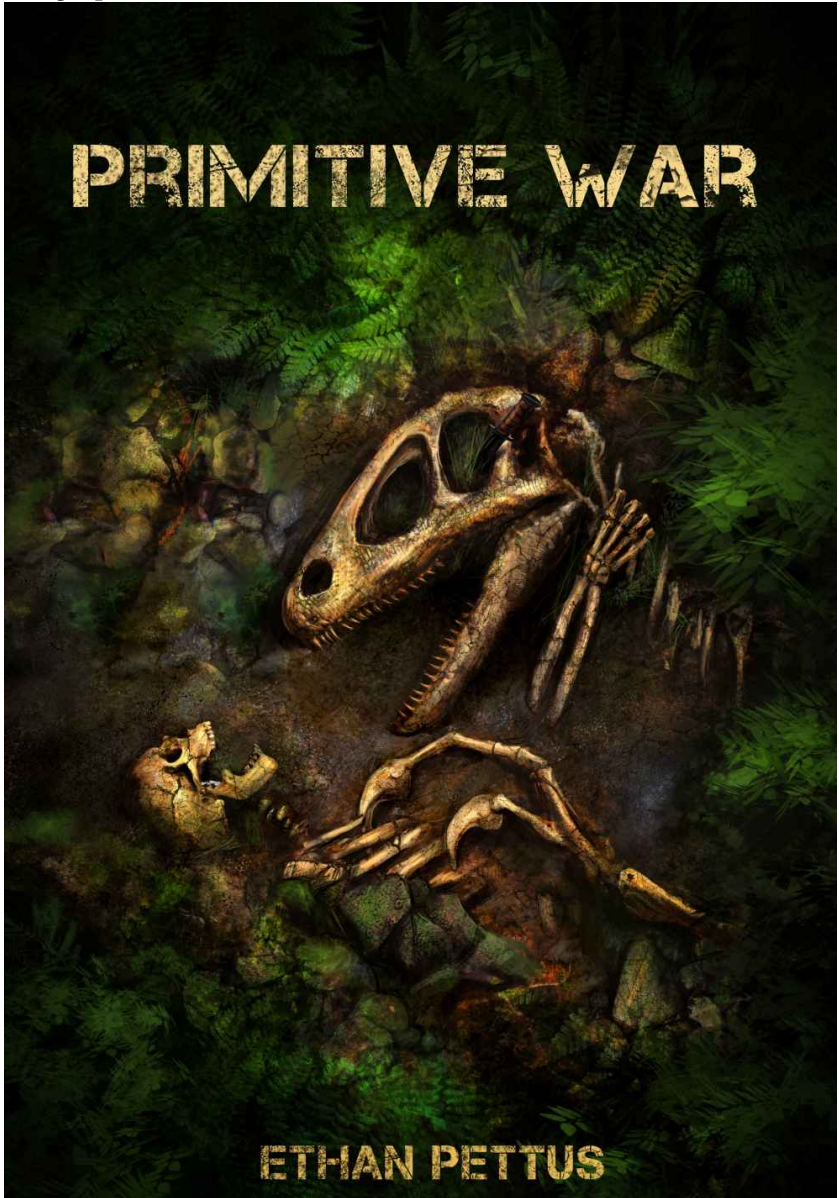
Ryan dragged the door open and waved in the rest of the squad. Logan and Leon went first, carrying Gerald’s mangled, bloodied body. Eli walked in after them, dragging Andrei across the floor like a limp sack. Miller and Xavier filed in after, waving their rifles at the shadows within, and Ryan shut the door behind them. He stepped over Andrei’s crumpled body and pointed at a table in the center of the room.

“Lay Gerald down there,” Ryan said. “Xavier, take care of him. Everybody else, stay by the windows, and keep an eye out for movement.”

Ryan swiped the lab equipment off of the table, and Logan and Leon set Gerald on top of it. Gerald stirred and groaned. Xavier set his medical supplies on the table beside him and rummaged

through its contents.

“His gauze needs to be changed, it’s soaked through,” Xavier said. “Plus some more morphine to keep him asleep. We don’t need him waking up like this.”



PRIMITIVE WAR
-A Novel by Ethan Pettus-

In Memory of Michael Crichton

Dedicated to my Mother and Father

PROLOGUE – September 23, 1968

Vietnam's natural splendor was plagued by war. Peaceful jungles were transformed into hellish labyrinths where soldiers lost their minds and lives to horrific firefights. Fear and paranoia pulled apart the threads of human morality. The Tet Offensive, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army's biggest push against American Forces in Southern Vietnam, set entire cities ablaze. Massacres were committed every day by both American forces and Viet Cong.

Many miles north of this conflict, beyond the Demilitarized Zone that separated North and South Vietnam, lay an ancient jungle valley seemingly untouched by the violence.

An ocean of thick tree-top canopy blanketed the rolling hills within the valley. A slithering black river bisected the floodplains of the basin and reflected the luminous moon on a starless night. Heavy clouds slumped over the cragged mountain peaks and drifted down the slopes.

War drums shook the air, warning the jungle of an approaching thunderstorm. Beneath the canopy, lost amongst the countless leviathan trunks of kapok and durian trees, a lone soldier named Kendrick Anderson ran for his life.

Kendrick clawed madly through the dripping wet thickets, his pale face strained with panic. The darkness consumed everything beneath the multi-layered canopy. Kendrick was blind, stumbling over creeping roots and low-slung vines. The broad leaves of banana trees slapped his face like frigid hands. His boot caught on a submerged log and he fell face-first into a carpet of rotting plant matter and tree bark. He dragged himself through the soil and climbed to his feet, whimpering like a beaten dog. How long had he been lost in this valley? It had only been a week, but each day felt like a separate life time, filled with harrowing new challenges to test his ability to survive. He was a member of the Green Beret, one of the U.S Army's masters of counter-guerilla warfare, but the valley proved to be too much for him. He was lucky to be alive and somewhat sane. The rest of his platoon hadn't been so fortunate.

When Kendrick's platoon had first marched into this obscure valley, they had been so sure of themselves. They thought their mission was just another walk through the park, evading Viet Cong and dangerous wildlife. That was until the first of his twelve-man platoon had died.

The first man to die was taken at night. Kendrick had awoken to find his friend Maynard missing in action. All he could find left of his squad-mate was a few ragged bits of skin and a trail of blood leading deeper into the wilderness. It happened to another man the following night, and again the night after that.

Sometimes they were taken while they slept; other times, during patrols. Kendrick would be walking with his platoon, and when he looked over his shoulder, another one of his fellow soldiers would be missing without a sound or sign of what had happened. They started to suspect that they were being followed by a man-eater, like a tiger or an Asiatic black bear. They all knew the legends, the stories passed among soldiers while eating their rations around a fire. The Vietnamese spoke of demons that haunted the jungle, abducting children from unsuspecting villages.

Kendrick thought that it made sense that vengeful demons would try their hand at abducting young Americans. His friends laughed at him for thinking so, but that was until they saw their killer late one night.

The creature was something Kendrick had never seen before, and

wished to never see again. It was fast, quiet, and nearly impossible to spot amongst the foliage. There were four of the creatures in total.

Despite the platoon's best efforts to fight back, the predators were too vicious and cunning. During the first encounter, three of Kendrick's squad mates had been slaughtered. He could still hear the sound of bones cracking, the wet rip of organs being torn from his screaming friends. Kendrick barely slept after the attack. It didn't take long for Kendrick's squad to fall apart. Somebody lost the radio during the attack, and another man lost his rifle and rucksack. They became lost within a maddeningly endless jungle, disconnected from their only chance of escape.

Two more men were taken the following night. Only Kendrick and two others were left. They had to continue pushing north in an attempt to complete their clandestine mission. The deeper they ventured into the valley, the more unnatural the jungle seemed to become. Hidden beasts howled in the night. Immense creatures, as big as planes, flew through the sky. They even discovered the skull of an elephant that had been crushed in the jaws of a powerful behemoth.

One morning, Kendrick discovered the body of one of his last remaining squad mates outside of their campsite. The young man's throat had been torn open and his stomach was eviscerated. Kendrick hadn't heard a thing; he had slept through the attack. His other friend, his only other remaining squad mate, committed suicide shortly thereafter.

And now, Kendrick was alone, running for his life through the forest, without any semblance of a plan or a hope for survival. He knew he was being hunted. Death lurked in every shifting shadow, hidden within the subtlest sound of a twig breaking or the rustling of leaves. He couldn't see or hear the creatures, but he knew they were there.

Kendrick could feel their cold eyes crawling over his bruised, beaten body. They were probably licking their teeth in anticipation, waiting for the perfect moment to tear into him while he was alive and screaming.

But he wouldn't let them.

God, no, he wouldn't let that happen.

A thunderclap shook the trees, and almost immediately a wave of heavy rainfall crashed through the canopy. The storm overwhelmed

Kendrick's senses. He squinted as rain pecked his eyes. The drone of the pattering rain filled his ears. He stumbled through the undergrowth, his hands held before him to keep from running into a tree trunk.

As Kendrick walked, he noticed the trees were becoming more spacious, and the undergrowth was shrinking back. Based on his training, he knew that he was approaching a water-way. If he found the river or a stream, he could follow the current towards the southern end of the valley, where his commanding officer, General Jericho, had a small military base.

Kendrick felt a smile tremble on his lips.

Maybe he was going to make it out alive.

There was a flash of lightning. Everything was painted in white light and traced with shadow. In that brief instant he saw the horrifying outline of the creature gliding through the undergrowth like an apparition. Thunder clapped above his head, and the jungle was thrown back into darkness.

Kendrick stood frozen in the torrential downpour. He stared wide-eyed into the abyss and slowly sank to his knees. It was out there, circling him. He dimly hoped that it couldn't see or smell him in the rain. Maybe it was just as blind as he was.

And then, through the constant thrum of rain, he heard it.

Heavy breathing, slowly coming closer.

Kendrick jumped to his feet and sprinted through the forest, weaving around tree trunks, jumping over logs and rocks. His boot fell off and he slowed down, wincing with each step. Twigs and stones tore apart the tender flesh of his rotted foot. He staggered, shaking beneath the icy needles of rain, propelled by his surging adrenaline. He heard the rain's relentless assault against the surface of the river. He was getting closer to escape.

Somewhere, his predator was watching. He could feel it.

Kendrick's bare foot slipped through the mud and he fell forward with a wet *smack*. His sense of fight-or-flight possessed him. He dug his hands into the marshy turf and dragged himself forward through the thick stalks and stems of swamp vegetation.

Kendrick pulled himself over a slope and he slid into frigid, fetid water. The cold shocked him and he thrust his head up out of the water, panting and shivering. There was a flash of lightning and he saw spider-legged mangrove trees surrounding him.

The jungle seemed empty, devoid of life.

That meant *it* was nearby.

Kendrick knew he couldn't run anymore. Each breath he took burned through his lungs. His body was numb from the cold, and his heart struggled to keep the thick blood pumping in his veins. It was time to hide. He cautiously waded through the chest-deep water towards the mangroves.

Kendrick pulled himself as deep into a cage of roots as he could and peered out into the black mirror of the water's surface. It appeared he had fallen into a pond; his only chance at escape had been a pipe dream. All he had left to do was sit and wait, shivering and gripped by terror.

Through the roaring storm, Kendrick could hear footsteps slowly padding around the water's edge. Each footstep was carefully placed, methodical and silent. He heard the predator sniffing the air, followed by a long, low growl. Leaves brushed softly against feathers and leathery skin. The creature was circling the pond, trying to locate Kendrick in the storm.

Kendrick carefully tucked himself further back into the mangrove's den and stared at the water's dappled surface. He held his breath until his lungs felt sucked dry.

There was a flash of lightning, and he saw the silhouette of the creature reflected on the water's surface. It was heavily distorted, but Kendrick could clearly see the outline of the animal's body. It was taller than a man, with a straight tail and muscular limbs. The creature raised its long snout, sniffing the air. The hooked claws flicked in anticipation. The creature's jaws parted into a toothy, rumbling snarl.

It was only ten feet away.

Kendrick trembled uncontrollably. Tears were lost with the rain on his face. A pitiful cry crawled out of his lips like a worm and he clasped his hands over his mouth to keep quiet. Urine flowed freely between his legs. Kendrick could hear the footsteps approaching slowly; the creature was taking its time. It knew that he had nowhere left to run.

Kendrick's eyes began to adjust to the darkness. He saw the muscular legs of the creature standing before him. The sickle-shaped claws flexed and dug into the earth. Kendrick was petrified with fear; he could no longer think or comprehend his reality. He could only watch as the creature crouched in front of him and stared back with cold, calculating eyes.

The creature spread its arms around the mangrove roots, cloaking the den with feathers. Its talons scraped against the root bark. One last embrace, to ensure there would be no escape. The creature's eyes glowed yellow in the darkness. The feathers muffled the sound of the storm. Kendrick could only hear his own whimpering and the slow, steady breathing of the animal. It was so dark that he could barely see the jaws of the creature opening to reveal serrated teeth. The animal's hot breath, rancid with decay, washed over him. Kendrick could feel a desperate plea catch in his throat.

"Pl-please-"

The creature's head shot forward and it snatched Kendrick's throat in its jaws. The animal shook him violently from side to side, ripping the flesh of his neck like tissue. Hot blood ran down Kendrick's torso and the creature let him go.

Kendrick fell backwards, screaming, and a fiery pain flared through his body as talons sliced his stomach open. The creature was savage, growling and indifferent while Kendrick shrieked and pounded its snout with his fists.

In his last fleeting moment of consciousness, Kendrick watched as the creature buried its snout into his abdomen and tugged out coils of intestine. The last thing he felt was his own horrendous death rattle boring through the ragged holes in his throat. This was not the war he knew.

CHAPTER ONE – BISHOP

"You know, this war will be over in just a matter of time."

"Uh-huh."

"It's all about survival..."

Bishop listened absent-mindedly as he stared out the window of the grumbling Jeep. The sun rose above the mountaintops and bathed the floodplains with brilliant golden light. The Jeep was slowly rolling down a long red-dirt road flanked by expansive rice paddies. Palm trees swayed in the breeze along the length of the road, casting shadows over the small green vehicle.

Bishop sat in the back seat of the Jeep beside his squad mate Ibex as Commander Wallace watched him from the passenger seat. David, Wallace's driver, was just as uninterested with the conversation as Bishop was. David had heard the same speech from Wallace countless times before.

“You see,” Wallace said, “This war is just a matter of survival. It’s in our nature to fight over territory, the same way that chimpanzee families fight other families over small patches of jungle.

“We have this instinctual need to exercise our might against one another, to let out this primal rage. This war isn’t about noble ideologies, like democracy or communism. This is simply another exercise, another test of our ability to kill.

“It’s like those chimps fighting. They need to exercise that bloodlust, just like we do. We need to kill; it’s part of who we are. It’s our primitive nature.”

Wallace watched Bishop expectantly.

“Sure,” Bishop grunted.

“See, the Pentagon, the government, they would like to have you believe that we’re out here fighting for the Vietnamese or the idea of freedom or what have you, but we all know that’s a crock of shit. We’re just being tested. That’s all this is.” Wallace said, pointing out the windshield.

“We’ve proven ourselves against the Germans, the Japanese, and the Koreans. Now we just have to prove that we’re better at this than these Viet Cong, these gooks that have been doing this dance for the past twenty, thirty years.

“The boys in the Pentagon, McNamara, the bureaucrats, they just want to prove that we can kill anything, anywhere. They want us to prove we can survive and fight better in these jungles than these Charlie-bastards can. But hey, I have no problem proving to them that my men are more than capable at surviving in this shit-storm. We’re the better animals. You’ll see it when we get into this village.”

Wallace turned his attention outside the window. Ibez looked at Bishop and twirled a finger beside his head. Bishop nodded with a weary sigh. They both felt the same way about Wallace’s inane rambling philosophy.

Bishop looked out the window and watched the sea of green rice paddies give way to bamboo huts scattered across a wide clearing cut from the encroaching forest. The Jeep rolled past dozens of American soldiers carrying M60’s and M16’s. Some were running through the villages, while others trudged half-heartedly. They passed by a tank slowly rumbling along the road, and the full force of the battalion appeared.

Further ahead, Bishop saw bamboo huts being torched by soldiers

with flamethrowers. Streams of fire shot from the nozzles and consumed the shelters. Immolated villagers were escaping their homes, rolling across the grass and dirt while screaming in pain. Some of the soldiers cut down the fleeing civilians with their assault rifles.

“Yep, it’s just a matter of survival.” Wallace said. He nudged David with his elbow. “Pull over, right here.”

David pulled the Jeep over to the side of the dirt road and parked beneath a swaying palm tree. Bishop and Ibex quickly stepped outside with their rifles in hand.

Bishop was lean and muscular, dressed casually in muddy jeans, a green t-shirt, and a green bandana over his mouth. His hair was short and ruffled, and a pair of black Ray-Bans concealed his eyes. He held a specially-customized AK-47 that was spray-painted black and green.

Ibex dressed more like a soldier than Bishop, wearing the standard Tiger-Stripe BDU’s of the Special Forces. He was a short and compactly built man of Tanzanian descent. He wore a necklace of crocodile teeth and a limp bush-hat.

Bishop shouldered his backpack and stood in the shade of the palm tree. Wallace stood before Bishop, his back turned to the sparse village and the soldiers pillaging it. Wallace grinned and spread his arms wide.

“Welcome to paradise, gentlemen,” Wallace said.

The tank thundered past and fired a rocket at a nearby hut. The shelter erupted with a concussive blast and burning debris rained from the sky. Bishop winced at the explosion and covered his head from the flurry of ash and embers.

“Just show us where you found it, already,” Bishop said quickly. “Jericho doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Wallace nodded briskly and took an M16 from the Jeep, glancing at Bishop over his shoulder as he held the rifle.

“Better stick close,” Wallace said with a wink. “This could get a little hairy.”

Bishop rolled his eyes at Ibex.

Wallace led Bishop and Ibex down the dirt path through columns of soldiers. The soldiers ran in and out of the huts along the road, searching for Viet Cong while ransacking small rooms. A line of soldiers stood beside the road with their rifles aimed at a row of Vietnamese men lying on the ground. As soon as Bishop passed by,

he heard the *crack* of their rifles, and he shook his head in disgust.

Bishop and Ibex didn't usually associate with the infantry. While they sympathized with the young men who were drafted into the military, they had little to no respect for leaders like Wallace. Bishop was silently thankful to be the right-hand man of General Amadeus Jericho, one of the most respected leaders of the United States Army.

Bishop was the squad leader of Jericho's personal black-ops team. Since their work was often clandestine and cut-throat, they rarely dealt with the Vietnamese villagers or the men that laid them to waste.

"When my platoon first entered this village, they captured the supply truck while it was heading south, out of the jungle," Wallace said, stepping over the gunshot-riddled body of a peasant farmer.

"My guys didn't know what to make of the barrels in the bed of the truck, so that's why I decided to ring ol' Jericho. I thought he would have some men that might know what we're dealing with here."

"We'll see," Bishop muttered.

As they went further into the village, the huts became more closely grouped together. American soldiers lingered outside, smoking joints and joking while others guarded bound-and-gagged Vietnamese men.

One soldier sat beside a hut, trembling violently, his head in his hands. His bloodshot eyes were aimed at the body of a woman lying in front of him. She was lying in a puddle of her own blood, a frying pan clutched in her hands. A child was tugging frantically at her dress. Another soldier came and pulled the screaming child away.

A woman suddenly ran out of a hut and came to Bishop's side. He turned to face her just as she latched onto him, pleading desperately in Vietnamese. Wallace took her by the arm and started pulling her away. There were tears streaming down her face.

"Not this again, young lady," Wallace said. He looked at a sergeant standing beside a hut, drinking with a couple of other soldiers. "I thought I told you to keep this girl away, goddammit!"

The Sergeant shrugged and walked forward.

"Sorry about that, sir. I'll take her back in."

The woman pulled out of Wallace's hands and held tightly onto Bishop. She was speaking urgently, staring directly into his eyes. He

could feel her desperation and panic.

“What’s she saying?” Bishop asked, turning to Wallace. He held the woman close.

“Just some native hocus-pocus bullshit,” Wallace said, shaking his head. “Something about demons, feathered serpents or some other monster.”

“What else is she saying?” Bishop asked.

Wallace sighed, disinterested.

“She’s been telling everybody that her husband was taken from their hut last night by a feathered serpent, a demon. It’s all horseshit. The guy probably wised up to this crazy girl and left town. That or she thinks he got eaten by a crocodile or something like that. It’s all just crazy talk; folk lore.”

Wallace pulled the woman out of Bishop’s hands and pushed her into the sergeant’s arms. The woman pleaded to Bishop as she was dragged back into the hut. Bishop felt something stirring in his gut, and he felt the need to make sure that she would be okay with the soldiers drinking around her.

Bishop watched as the soldiers laughed and followed the woman and the Sergeant inside. He couldn’t get the fear in the woman’s voice out of his head as Wallace pulled him away, deeper into the village.

“Here it is, boys,” Wallace said.

They were standing at the end of the village, where a rusted supply truck had broken down beside several huts. A few soldiers sat around it, smoking, drinking, and talking. The tank rumbled in the distance and they heard the echoing crackle of gunshots.

Beside the truck, a single Viet Cong guerilla writhed in pain on the ground. Blood seeped through the man’s ragged shirt from the bullet wounds on his chest. Wallace grimaced as he listened to the man cry.

“For god’s sake, David, this is sickening,” Wallace said. “He’s suffering!”

“Sorry, sir,” David said. He stepped forward and put the barrel of his M16 to the man’s forehead. Bishop shoved David aside and the M16 fired into the ground. Bishop crouched and poured water from his canteen into the man’s mouth. The man nodded thankfully and stared at Bishop with dull eyes. His lips trembled.

“*Máy gia tốc,*” the man coughed.

Bishop looked at Ibex. "What's he saying?"

"Collider," Ibex said, narrowing his eyes. "What does it mean?"

A gunshot rang out beside Bishop's ear and he recoiled in shock. He looked back down and saw the guerilla's head bleeding beside the truck tire. A bullet wound, like a gaping third eye, blinked from the center of the man's forehead. Bishop turned back to David and glared at the smoke rising from the barrel of his M16.

"He was struggling," David said, shrugging. "It'd be cruel to keep him alive."

Bishop stood up and shoved David aside. He brushed past Wallace and walked around to the back of the truck. The bed was covered with a rain-soaked tarp. Bishop and Ibex took the corners of the tarp and pulled it off. Wallace walked up to them.

"So, we--"

"Just go away, Jack," Bishop snapped. "I've seen enough of your 'survival' tactics. I'm sure Jericho will be glad to hear about it. Now get out of here and go back to your men. I'm sick of hearing your voice."

Wallace frowned, but he shrugged and walked off with David and the other soldiers in tow. Bishop watched them leave and shook his head. He glanced at Ibex.

"These fucking people," he said. "He was right about one thing, though. He certainly knows about primitive nature. The man's turned his men into animals."

Bishop turned back to the truck. The bed was loaded with lead oil drums, about a dozen in total. The oil drums had Russian lettering printed in yellow across their sides. Bishop fished into his backpack and drew out a Geiger counter, a device for detecting radiation. He turned a dial on the counter and aimed it at the closest oil drum.

Almost immediately, the Geiger counter began to click rapidly; the oil drum was highly radioactive. Bishop and Ibex quickly backpedaled several meters away, until the counter ceased to tick. Bishop drew a map from his backpack and unfolded it.

Numerous 'x's were ticked across the map, leading from South of the DMZ all the way north, towards Jericho's base, and into the isolated jungle valley beyond where they had yet to venture. Bishop drew another 'x' at the bottom of the map and traced a line towards the interior of the valley. He folded the map and put it back into his backpack.

"Radio," Bishop said.

Ibex took the bulky metal radio from his backpack and gave it to Bishop. Bishop turned several dials, punched a code into the keypad on the front, and put the headset to his ear. He listened to the hiss of static until a voice growled through.

“What’s your call-sign?”

“Bravo-Mike-Sierra, calling for Golf Alpha Juliet,” Bishop said.

“Roger, Bravo-Mike. Golf-Alpha reporting. What’s your status?”

“We’ve confirmed the location and status of the shipment,” Bishop said. “It’s the same as the others; highly radioactive, Russian markings, driven by suspected Viet Cong. Our suspect was killed before we could get any real information from him. This is the fifth shipment since September, sir.”

General Jericho, the man on the other end of the line, grumbled beneath his breath.

“Have you heard anything from Kilo Anderson and his platoon?” Bishop asked.

Static buzzed in Bishop’s ear. General Jericho spoke slowly.

“Not a word. It’s been a week since they started back-tracking the shipments, and we lost all radio contact three days in. I think they’re missing in action.”

There were explosions behind them, back in the village. The concussive blasts made the trees shake around the clearing. Bishop turned his back and faced the depths of the jungle. Somewhere out there, he knew, Kendrick Anderson was in desperate need of help. Bishop scratched his chin thoughtfully.

“What do we do now, sir?” Bishop asked.

“You and Ibex sit tight; I have a Huey on its way to lift you both out of that village. As for Kilo-Anderson and his team...”

Bishop listened to the radio static.

“...Sir?”

“Kilo-Anderson and his team were the best men I could find for the job. I’m going to need a lot of help to pick up where they left off,” Jericho said.

“Don’t tell me,” Bishop said. He tightened his fingers around the receiver.

“Unfortunately,” Jericho’s voice came gnarled through the static.

“We need Vulture Squad.”

CHAPTER TWO– VULTURE SQUAD

By nightfall, a powerful monsoon had swept through the jungles

of Northern Vietnam. In the western mountain range, nestled between domed hill tops lush with billowing layers of forest canopy, was a primitive Viet Cong internment camp. The camp was positioned in the center of a several-acre wide clearing cut from the forest, with thatch huts in a ring around the wooden holding pen that held the American prisoners.

From beneath the thick vegetation at the outskirts of the camp, Captain Ryan Baker watched as two Viet Cong guerillas slowly patrolled the edge of the forest. The two men trudged with their heads bowed to the tremendous downpour, their AK-47's hanging low and loose in their arms.

Ryan was an unflinching statue beneath the frigid shower. Only his hard-set emerald eyes followed the march of the two guerillas. He held his ka-bar knife tight in hand. After a month of stalking the internment camp, Ryan and his squad were ready to reap retribution for the prisoners.

Ryan Baker was the captain of Vulture Squad, an elite Special Forces squadron that specialized in the liberation of prison camps. By the age of 28, Ryan had seen his closest friends butchered by mortars, mutilated by mines, and ripped apart by automatic rifles. His heart had become filled with a distilled hatred that seldom seeped through his rigid exterior. A wool mask covered all but his eyes. His squad had never seen his face; they only knew him for his cold, calculating stare.

Vulture Squad's newest recruit and explosive ordinance specialist, Leon Varne, was crouched beside Ryan. He was a handsome young man, with a grizzled square jaw and eyes like speckled blue robin eggs. His ruffled brown hair was damp and dripping water into his eyes. To Ryan, Leon was neither a man nor a child; he was somewhere in transition. That meant he had to be kept on a short leash.

Ryan could sense Leon's anticipation. He saw Leon's knife trembling in the corner of his eye. The Viet Cong sentries were close; their voices grew louder within the growl of thunder. Leon peered through the palm fronds for a better view, but Ryan halted him with a sharp look. His narrowed eyes communicated a clear message in Leon's head.

Be patient.

Leon nodded and sat back on his haunches.

Ryan returned his attention to the two Viet Cong sentries and

tensed his muscles. He slowly crept through broad banana leaves and slippery wet palm fronds towards the two men with Leon following close behind. At the edge of the clearing, Ryan held up his fist to halt Leon; he was close enough to see the stitching in the guerilla's tattered pant legs. Ryan locked eyes with Leon and they raised their ka-bar knives.

They pounced at the whip-crack of lightning.

Ryan and Leon each grabbed a man by the throat and pulled them beneath the foliage. They plunged their ka-bars deep into the chests of the men, piercing their hearts. Leon grimaced as hot blood washed over his hands, but Ryan remained unblinking. They held their victims until they ceased to squirm and gently laid the bodies beneath the undergrowth.

Ryan pulled his CAR-15 assault rifle off of his back and crouched at the edge of the forest. Leon drew his M16 assault rifle and sat beside Ryan.

Their view of the internment camp was heavily obscured by the torrential downpour. It was a moonless night; mist filled the air like cement. Dim lanterns flickered from the dilapidated bamboo shelters across the clearing. Ryan had to squint until he could see the wooden walls of the prison and the watch tower behind it.

An apparition faded in and out of the rainfall on the tower's deck. The scope of a sniper rifle glinted silver in the apparition's hands. Ryan stared holes through the sniper's head.

Any minute now...

Lightning illuminated the camp, and the echoing crackling masked the sound of a gunshot. In the flickering light, Ryan saw a cloud of burgundy bloom from the back of the sniper's head. The rifle flew from the man's hands and he fell backwards over the railing, into the holding pen. Logan Stovall, Vulture Squad's sniper, had struck. That was the sign; the rest of the squad would be moving in for the kill.

On the opposite end of the camp, Eli Taylor snickered as he watched the sniper's body topple over the railing. Rain traced the shrapnel scars across his cheeks. He had a boxer's face; a crooked nose, cauliflower ears, dented cheekbones, and eyes that moved too quickly. The marine slogan, *Semper Fi*, was drawn in black block lettering across his pock-marked helmet.

Tally marks were scratched into the chipping paint of Eli's Ithaca shotgun; each tally represented a taken life. Half of the shotgun's

paint had been chiseled away over the past two years. Eli took a sip of bourbon from his flask and slipped it back into his vest. Charlie Miller slapped the back of Eli's helmet.

"Don't think I didn't see that, Eli," Miller said. "Put that shit away, man. We gotta move."

Eli was an Appalachian hick; a Kentuckian. Miller was from the Bronx. They were brothers forged in the fires of Hue City, one of Vietnam's most intense conflicts during the Tet Offensive.

Miller's rust-red hair was cropped into a pristine crown, his features were strong, and he only had two or three scars on his young face. His grandmother's ruby-beaded rosary was wrapped tightly around the ka-bar blade on his belt. He often said that if he had his Ka-Bar, he could survive anything.

"C'mon," Miller hissed, "Let's go!"

Eli and Miller jumped to their feet and ran into the fog. Eli led the way with his Ithaca shotgun while Miller scanned their surroundings with his M16.

Thunder rumbled throughout the camp. They were running blind through the rain. Further ahead, they could see the details of a bamboo shelter emerge from the dark. A campfire's glow flickered through the seams of the hut. Eli dropped to his knees and slid through the mud to the edge of the primitive shelter.

Miller knelt beside Eli and peered around the sides of the hut. The quick dialect of the Vietnamese men inside was muffled through the rotting timber that masked the doorway. They heard flames sizzle and pop. The smell of wood smoke and cooking fish was strong.

Miller slapped Eli on the shoulder. Eli huffed; the alcohol on his breath turned the damp air hot in his lungs.

Eli smashed in the door with his Ithaca and immediately spun the barrel onto the first set of eyes he saw. He pulled the trigger and launched the man tending the fire into the arms of another. The second man stumbled backwards, mulched skull sprayed across his chest.

"Charlie, Three O' Clock!"

Eli ducked as bullets tore over his head. A third man stood to his right, AK-47 raised. Miller spun into the doorway and shot the man in the face. The man's jaw snapped inward. The second man howled in terror.

Eli turned his Ithaca onto the screaming man and pulled the

trigger, punching a hole through the man's sternum. The man slammed against the wall and sank to the floor. A red halo was smeared over his head.

The fire snapped and hissed at Miller and Eli. They quickly searched the bodies for keys to the holding pen. After finding none, they re-entered the storm and sprinted to the next hut.

Icy rain needled the back of Eli's neck. He took a sip from the flask to warm himself up, as well as to prepare for the next bout of adrenaline. Miller slapped the back of Eli's helmet. Eli choked and glared at Miller, tucking the flask away.

Miller nodded his head at the open doorway. Golden light poured from an electric lantern onto the mud; evidence of a superior officer. Several men were laughing on the other side of the wall. Eli bounced on his heels, letting the alcohol loosen his joints, and he stepped into the doorway.

Five men were sitting around a card table. The first man in Eli's sights received a slug to the temple. Bone shards scraped the face of the man sitting next to him. They all yelped and dove away; some went for their rifles leaning against the wall.

Eli pumped another slug into his Ithaca, ducked, and shot another man between the shoulder blades. The man screamed and spat thick red over his lips. The *thump* of the Ithaca blast was deafening in the small hut.

Miller brushed past Eli and fired a rapid succession of shots into each of the scrambling men. His shots snapped their skulls, punched through chests, severed spines, and cut through throats. The last man screaming was silenced with a shot to the temple. His cries dropped to a gurgling choke. Miller's eyes were hard against the slaughter. Eli swallowed roughly.

Once the room was silent, Eli and Miller got on their hands and knees and searched through the pockets of each body. Eli kept his eyes on the ground as his hands brushed over the warm, wet cloth of a man's tattered pants. He felt the cold bronze keys and said, "Found 'em!"

Miller didn't speak. He tugged on Eli's sleeve.

A guerilla watched them from the doorway, AK-47 raised.

They stared. Eli spat tobacco juice at the man's feet.

"Just get it over with, Xavier," Eli said. "Don't make a mess."

Xavier brought the machete down with a *whack*. Hot blood splashed the floor, and the guerilla collapsed before Eli and Miller.

Xavier Wise, Vulture Squad's medic, wiped the crimson from his machete. He had a thick black beard and a shaggy mane of onyx hair. His eyes were muddy pools with crinkled corners that defied his true age. He was Ryan's second in command, the most centered and calm man in the squad. He was a hunter from Maine, a master tracker with a warrior's heart. He sheathed his machete and drew his M16.

"Try not to make so much noise next time," Xavier said. His voice was as low and smooth as a river. "I've heard napalm strikes that were quieter than you two."

"Yeah, well, you know how I like to make 'em scream," Eli replied. "Just ask your sister."

"Hey, watch it," Xavier said, wagging his finger. "Have you got the keys?"

Eli jingled the keys in front of Xavier's face. Miller snatched them from his fingers and walked into the storm.

"Let's go," Miller said over his shoulder. "We can't let Ryan and Leon have all the fun."

Three wooden beams stood in the center of a clearing at the gates of the holding pen. A greasy pit of ashes smoldered beneath a raggedy thatch canopy behind the wooden beams. The canopy covered a make-shift kitchen. Skinned ducks and monkeys hung by their feet from the rafters. Crates of ammunition served as chairs. Rain soaked every surface.

Ryan narrowed his eyes from the biting rain drops. A frail human body was strung from each of the wooden beams in the center of the clearing. Leon swallowed hoarsely behind him.

"Jesus," Leon muttered.

Ryan held his hand up to silence Leon as he approached the first pole. A man was tied to the pole by his ankles and wrists. The figure was naked, skeletal and pale. Ryan could see festering sores and bug bites bright against the man's skin. His ribcage was black from bruises.

Ryan stood before the man and put a hand to his throat to check the pulse. When he met the man's eyes, he took his hand away. The man's eye sockets squirmed with countless maggots.

Ryan took the man's dog tags and checked the bodies strung from the other two poles. He found they were in various states of decomposition, so he took their dog tags as well and walked back to Leon. There was a fire in Ryan's heart, and it was being fed fresh

kindling. He squeezed the dog tags and slipped them into his pocket.

Leon recognized the cold ferocity in Ryan's eyes.

"What'd you see?"

"Enough," Ryan grunted, and he brushed past Leon to the prison gates. They were fifteen feet high, built from felled trees, and topped with rusting barbed wire. Ryan glanced over his shoulder.

"The others should be here any second," Ryan said.

Ryan heard the blast of Eli's shotgun and flinched. A hole was blown through the thatch of a bamboo hut across the clearing. Eli swung his legs through the hole and hopped out with Miller and Xavier in tow. They darted across the clearing, rifles waving back and forth, towards Ryan and Leon.

"Having fun yet?" Miller asked.

"Always," Ryan replied dryly. He held out his hand. "Keys?"

Miller dropped the keys in Ryan's hand. "Speaking of keys," Miller said, "Any word from Gerald and Logan? Are we all clear to go inside?"

Ryan took a radio headset from Leon's backpack and placed it against his ear.

"Golf, Lima, are we clear to engage?" he asked.

"Roger, Romeo. All clear, no tangos," the radio hissed.

"Roger that, Golf," Ryan said. He unlocked the gate's rusty padlock and dragged open the door.

"Keep your eyes on us," Ryan said into the headset. "We're going in."

On top of a shaggy cliff above the tree tops, Gerald Keyes and Logan Stovall watched the rest of the squad through the scopes of their sniper rifles. Gerald was the shortest man on the squad, only 5'8, but he had a movie star's copper tan and sharp-angled features with a smile of shining pearls. His buzzed hair was dark and thick, and his eyes were piercing blue.

Despite being a master of stealth, Gerald was the most upbeat and talkative member of Vulture Squad. He was the exact opposite of his best friend and sniping partner, Logan.

Logan Stovall, Vulture Squad's sniper, was a gaunt and grim young man who seemed to be 24 going on 55. His skin was gnarled like the bark of an oak tree, and his eyes were harder than granite. He spoke only in rasped whispers, like sandpaper being scratched together.

Nobody knew as much about Logan as Gerald. Gerald was the only person that Logan would hold a conversation with; Logan would hardly give a word to any of the other members of the team. They had served in the Marine Scout Snipers for several years before they were recruited into Vulture Squad, and their friendship had been solidified by a grim secret they shared.

"We have Victor-Charlie approaching from eleven and two o'clock," Gerald whispered.

Logan aimed his M40 Sniper Rifle to the far right corner of the internment camp and saw a group of four guerrillas emerge from the jungle. They walked with slumped shoulders, rifles aimed at the forest floor, heads bowed.

With a deep breath, Logan let the crosshairs of his scope rest on the forehead of a Viet Cong like a crown. Gerald did the same with his M14 rifle on a second group of Viet Cong on the far left corner of the camp.

They listened to the rain.

"You're clear to engage," Gerald whispered.

Logan understood the weight of his M40. With one pull of the trigger, he could extract a human life from its mortal shell. He could barely make out the face of the man he had targeted, but he knew that they now shared a connection more powerful and intimate than any relationship other people could ever know. Logan controlled the man's life. He would do what he had to do, despite the millions of alternate lives the man could have lived.

Evil devil devil god kill god evil god

Logan pulled the trigger, and a rose blossomed from the back of the man's head. The other Viet Cong dove away before the body even hit the ground. Logan knew that escape was man's vain attempt to retake control of his own destiny, but there was no such thing as escape. Escape could only be found through death.

Disgusting freak scum shit

Logan grumbled. He repositioned the rifle and took aim at a fleeing guerrilla. With one tug of his finger, he took the man's leg away and doomed him to a life as a cripple. With a second squeeze, Logan freed the man from a life of suffering. This was how his mind operated.

Logan found combat peaceful because of his disassociation; he could act as an external operator, detached from the true horror. He couldn't escape the aftermath of guilt, but he could stifle the pain

during the act.

Blasphemy blasphemous bastard spawned satan shit

"Shut up," Logan hissed.

"Logan?" Gerald asked. He fired a round and glanced sideways.

"What are they saying?"

"Crazy shit," Logan whispered. "Just crazy shit."

Logan shot a third fleeing man in the back of the neck. The body went rolling through the mud, splashing blood. The fourth guerrilla had ducked behind the wooden legs of the watch tower. Logan could wait; patience was his luxury.

Despite his predatory prowess as a sniper, Logan held no hatred for the men he had slain. He only killed the wicked Viet Cong. Yet, whenever he had a man on the opposite end of his rifle, he scarcely saw wickedness. Not many men could act like more than weak, praying, and god-fearing animals as they waited for death to take them away.

Worthless fucking murderer goddamned monster goddamned godless heathen

"Stop," Logan whispered, "Please, god, stop it."

The hiding man peered around the watch tower, and Logan pulled the trigger. The man's eye socket suddenly gaped wide and black, draining thick red fluid. The body slumped against the wooden leg and rainwater washed over the slack figure. He remained upright against the column as long as Logan watched. The black hole of the man's eye seemed to stare through the scope at Logan. The voices whispered through his skull.

Godless heathen godless godless heathen

Logan wrenched the M40 away and slammed it on the ground between him and Gerald. He sat back, took off his helmet, and rubbed his temples beneath the confederate bandana he wore over his scalp. Gerald sat upright and put an arm around Logan. Logan flinched but didn't recoil. He accepted Gerald's embrace. He rocked on his heels and whispered to himself.

"Don't worry, Logan," Gerald said, "You did the right thing. If you didn't kill those Viet Cong...don't worry about what they're saying. Everything's going to be fine."

"Just give me a second," Logan said.

Murderer murderer murderer

"Just a second," Logan repeated.

"Take all the time you need," Gerald said. He took a cigarette from

his pack of Camels and lit it with a match. With a puff, he slowly exhaled a plume of smoke that was pummeled beneath the rain. Gerald listened to the peaceful ambiance of the jungle's nightlife while Logan mumbled to himself. Only Gerald knew about Logan's schizophrenia.

The inside of the holding pen was little more than a pit of shit and mud. The prisoners shambled like skeletal corpses to the opened gateway where Ryan stood with his CAR-15. Leon helped carry the men who could no longer walk. Xavier examined the bodies of the prisoners, administered first aid to those he could immediately help, and pointed Eli and Miller to the deceased.

Eli and Miller took the dead men by their ankles and wrists and placed them inside of black leather body bags. They were careful not to look each other in the eyes as they worked.

Ryan released a sigh that seemed to rise from his marrow. He had seen similar camps innumerable times before, but there were some things that a man could never adapt to. Ryan was grateful that he had spent his service in Vietnam rescuing prisoners of war, but his heart felt no fuller for the act.

Every time Ryan went to an internment camp, he was presented with new horrendous presentations of man's true nature. Ryan was always reminded of what lied in the shadows of the human mind. He wished he could have remained ignorant of what humans were capable of, but he knew there was no escaping the truth.

A leviathan troop-transport helicopter, a Seabring, descended through the rain clouds and landed beside the camp. Ryan and the rest of Vulture Squad quickly ushered the surviving prisoners inside and carried the deceased in as well. Gerald and Logan came across the clearing and assisted them.

Once their work was done, the men of Vulture Squad saluted the Seabring and watched as it ascended into the storm clouds. Their personal transport helicopter, a Huey-Iroquois lovingly titled "The Father Vulture", settled down in the Sebring's place.

Ryan threw open the cabin door and waved the squad inside. Exhausted, the men shuffled to their seats and turned their attention away from each other. They were content to listen to the rain pattering against the window panes.

Ryan pulled the cabin door shut and the Father Vulture rose into the thunderstorm. Gusts of wind blasted the hull, tossing them back

and forth like a mosquito being swat. Ryan struggled to stand upright and stepped into the cockpit to speak to their personal pilot, Ricardo Alvarez.

“What’s our next stop?” Ryan asked. “Hawaii? Costa Rica?”

Ricardo laughed. He had to shout over the roaring rotor blades.

“You know you’re never going on vacation again. We’re going to an American base north of the DMZ. Some valley in the middle of nowhere, just endless rainforest. Jericho’s orders.”

Ryan went rigid at the mention of Jericho’s name. Ricardo kept talking, but Ryan slipped out of the cockpit and dropped heavily into a window-seat beside Leon. He fingered the flesh beneath his mask; the skin was painfully etched and unshaven.

“Who’s Jericho?” Leon asked. He had a zoology encyclopedia open on his lap; Leon always had his nose in a book.

“General Amadeus Jericho,” Ryan muttered. “He’s in charge of all clandestine operations in Vietnam. He normally works with Special Forces like Green Beret or CIA operatives like the MACV-SOG. I’ve only worked with him once before, when I first joined Vulture Squad as a rookie...”

Ryan shook his head and stared out the window into the darkness outside, as thick as ink. “It didn’t go well,” he said.

“What do you think he wants from us?” Leon asked.

Ryan tugged on his mask; a nervous tick. His fingers were jittery and numb. Stars exploded behind his eyes. He felt fire on his face, shrapnel in his gut. He squeezed the woolen mask and stared blindly outside. The helicopter’s thumping rotor blades sounded like mortar fire pounding the earth. Ryan’s pupils dilated.

“I don’t know,” Ryan said. “That’s what scares me.”

CHAPTER THREE – THE RUSSIAN COMPOUND

In the depths of the isolated valley where Kendrick Anderson and his platoon had met their gruesome fate, a troop of Viet Cong guerrillas slowly trudged through the pummeling storm. They were climbing a muddy uphill path through dense forest, clambering over the half-buried roots of ficus trees that had formed a natural staircase in the earth.

The Viet Cong were on edge, peering into the darkness beyond the low-slung vines of the canopy. They held their AK-47 assault rifles and shotguns tight in hand as they climbed. The leader of the group, a man named Con Nhen, took a drag from a joint laced with

opium at the top of the path. A flower-scented cloud steamed from between his thin lips.

Con Nhen scratched his ratty goatee. He was a wiry young man, with a skeletal face and limbs that seemed too long for his small frame. He put his AK-47 over his shoulder and squinted at his staggering men. The trail was becoming a mudslide.

The troop was making slow progress, and Con Nhen knew that the Russian General they were going to meet, Borodin, was an impatient man. Con Nhen narrowed his bloodshot eyes at the primary reason for their crawling pace.

At the rear of the procession was a young man, barely past 18 years old. A row of bite marks on his calf had turned septic. With each step he took, the semi-circle of sores oozed pus and blood. The boy bit his lip and stifled his pained cries. He took another step and collapsed, sliding further down the trail. He clawed at the roots for purchase, and another man helped pull him to his knees.

The other men stopped climbing; they held onto vines for support and stared. The rain bit their skin.

Con Nhen glared at the boy. His AK-47 was angled at the boy's forehead.

"Please, Con," one of the men said. "We can carry him."

"He's dead-weight," Con Nhen drawled. "Bait for the *demons*."

"Please, sir," The boy panted. He buried his fists into the mud to keep from sliding downhill. He leaned forward and vomited, the sputum crawling around his knees. The boy moaned and touched his forehead to the mud. He began to cry.

"We can get medical supplies from Borodin," another man said.

"I have the only medicine this child needs," Con Nhen drawled. He climbed down to the boy and put the joint to his lips. The boy pinched his lips shut, but Con Nhen managed to force the joint between the kid's teeth.

"He has a child, sir," one of the guerrillas said.

"Then at least he will be remembered," Con Nhen grunted. He pulled the trigger of his AK-47 and punched a hole through the boy's forehead.

The rest of the Viet Cong watched as Con Nhen placed a boot against the body and pushed it downhill. The corpse tumbled like a rag doll and splashed into a puddle at the bottom of the trail.

Con Nhen picked up his joint and put it back between his lips. He took a slow drag from it.

“Keep moving,” he growled.

The guerrillas continued their steady march uphill. When Con Nhen looked over his shoulder, the boy was already buried in the mud. All that was visible was a single hand, clawing for air.

Con Nhen felt nothing for the loss. It was a matter of survival; lose the weakest member, and they could continue their journey as a stronger pack. In these haunted jungles, it was best not to be weighed down by something as petty as emotion. Con Nhen needed to keep his operation alive and moving. He couldn’t afford to keep General Borodin waiting.

After another hour of hiking, the guerrillas reached the end of the trail. A towering pair of steel doors stood at the precipice of the hill. A concrete wall topped with curling razor wire stretched from both sides of the gate into the jungle beyond. Lichen and moss were spread across the perimeter walls in innumerable shades of green, and creeping ivy grew thick and tangled through the wire.

The steel doors slowly groaned open on rusted hinges, and the sounds of heavy machinery poured from the entrance. A pair of soldiers dressed in black uniforms and gas-masks stood at the gate, their rifles aimed at the guerrillas. Con Nhen gave them a curt nod and walked inside with his men. The guards quickly shut the doors and bolted heavy locks in place. Con Nhen put his rifle over his shoulder and examined the interior of the compound.

Dozens of soldiers were rushing around the muddy clearing, carrying loads of equipment beneath tarps. Groups of soldiers keeping watch were gathered around fires beneath the canopy that stretched over the perimeter walls. Beyond the concrete barracks where the soldiers stayed, Con Nhen could see a hangar-sized complex composed of exposed steel girders and concrete. Con Nhen knew that building was the home of General Borodin’s pet project, the Collider.

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear, Con Nhen thought.

General Borodin was already striding across the clearing towards Con Nhen with his armed guards in tow. Borodin was wearing a charcoal-colored trench coat that concealed his bulk, and his unkempt beard covered his neck. He ducked through the downpour and pulled his collar up against the cold air.

“Good to see you, comrade,” Borodin shouted over the din of sound. “Come; follow me. I want to show you what you’ve helped us accomplish. We’re almost ready.”

Con Nhen and his men started to follow Borodin, but the Russian guards quickly blocked off the guerrillas. Borodin looked over his shoulder at them and laughed.

“Not them, Con Nhen. Only you,” he said.

Con Nhen nodded and told his men to stay, then followed Borodin into the building at the back of the compound. The patter of rain on steel filled the inside of the building, and Russian voices echoed across the room. It was dark; sparks from welding torches flashed around the expansive space. Several dim fluorescent lights shone in the corners. The building seemed to be vast, yet simple; nothing more than a large storage facility.

“Misha, can we get some lights in here?” Borodin shouted.

Brilliant white light glared throughout the building. Con Nhen blinked until his eyes adjusted, and he gasped.

A two-story structure filled the majority of the building. It appeared to be a horizontal ring constructed of brushed steel, with glass port-hole windows along its sides. There was a second ring on top of it, and they were conjoined by a slant steel tube.

Several catwalks rimmed the walls above the machine, and generators were hooked into it with hundreds of wires that trailed across the floor. Con Nhen stared, transfixed. He had never seen such a complex apparatus. He turned to Borodin.

“Is this the Collider?” Con Nhen asked.

“It is,” Borodin said. There was a smile hidden in his black bush of a beard. “This device is going to propel the motherland into a new age. All of the American’s nuclear technology will be nothing more than primitive tools compared to this device.”

Con Nhen craned his head back to see the welders climbing on top of the collider. “What does it do?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand the science,” Borodin said.

“Just understand that it will provide limitless energy to every corner of the Soviet Union. It will give us a greater understanding of the cosmos, and the creation of the universe as we understand it. This...this is a window to the big bang, and the origin of our reality.”

Con Nhen stared at Borodin, chewing on his joint. “But really,” he said. “What does it do?”

Borodin put a meaty hand on Con Nhen’s shoulder. “Oh, Con Nhen, you fool,” he laughed. “Maybe when you’re done wrestling in the mud over your pitiful ideologies, you’ll understand what man can

achieve with science.”

“Don’t think you’re out of the mud yet, Borodin,” Con Nhen said. “You’ve still got an ideology to wrestle with.” He placed a piece of cold metal into the palm of Borodin’s hand.

“What’s-” Borodin looked into his palm and stared. His hand began to tremble. “Where-where did you find this?”

“We found it a mile south of this complex,” Con Nhen said. “We’ve found other things as well. Boots, backpacks, and even this,”

Con Nhen handed Borodin a map. Borodin’s eyes darted across the numerous lines that were drawn across the valley. He was shaking. His hands tightened into fists.

“The Americans are already on the hunt,” Con Nhen said. “Even if those men died, more will soon follow. It’s only a matter of time until they find your little experiment.”

“Get out of here, Con, and don’t come back,” Borodin said. He was still shaking. “The last two containers of discharge are by the gate. Take them, and get away from here. Go see Viktor for your payment.”

“Yes, sir,” Con Nhen said, and he turned to walk out the door.

Borodin folded the map and tucked it into his jacket pocket. He looked into the palm of his hand, and he felt a cold sweat begin to develop beneath his starched uniform.

The name ‘Kendrick Anderson’ was printed on the bloody dog tags.

CHAPTER FOUR – JERICHO’S ORDERS

Hours passed by as the Father Vulture drifted through a landscape of thick thunderclouds. Rain-washed moonlight, chopped by the rotor blades, flickered throughout the helicopter’s icebox interior. The air inside of the cabin was filthy with the smell of grease, gunpowder, and sweat.

Ryan stared through the window’s film of condensation and gazed at the moon, a polished skull floating in shimmering black swamp water. The Father Vulture creaked mournfully as it swayed through the gusts like a ship at sea. The only other sound was Eli tapping his boots on the floor.

Leon looked up from his book at Eli’s pale, quivering eyes. It seemed like Eli was looking at something beyond their realm of space, deep in the fathoms of night. Eli spat tobacco juice in a soda

can and chipped the paint off his Ithaca shotgun with a fingernail. Beside him, Miller held his Ka-Bar against his forehead and prayed inaudibly. The crucifix of his rosary rested on his lower lip.

"What's the matter with you guys?" Leon asked. His voice was resonant in the small chamber. "I've never seen you two get so worked up over a helicopter flight before."

Miller's lips stopped moving and he opened an eye at Leon.

"I don't like helicopter flights above Charlie territory," Miller said. "Eli and I've had some bad experiences north of the DMZ." Eli's eyes jumped to Leon. "Yeah man, we've been blasted out of our helicopter before. Swear to god, our first mission with the Marines, and outta nowhere we get shot by a rocket and blown to kingdom-fucking-come. Like that," Eli snapped his fingers, "We were knocked out of the air and spinning towards the earth. Just like that, swear to god."

"It was like hell," Miller said. "Just being dragged down through darkness, swirling through fire and smoke, screaming and chaos. I got knocked out on impact, and if it weren't for Eli, I would've died."

"What happened?" Leon asked.

Miller opened his eyes and sat up. "When we hit the ground, I passed out. Eli and one other Marine, a friend of ours, Ramirez, they were the only other two alive. Eli dragged me out of the helicopter before I got burned up, and when I came to, we started fighting off Viet Cong in the bush."

"How many men were on the helicopter?" Leon asked.

"*Sixteen*," Eli said. "Thirteen guys zapped on our first mission. So it goes, y'know? Anyways, we was outnumbered, outgunned, and hurt bad. Miller had an M60, I had this little baby Ithaca, and Ramirez had an M16. We were huddled around the crashed helicopter, and we was surrounded by Viet Cong. The forest was lighting up like fireworks.

"We were running and duckin', taking shots at anything we could, blasting any gook we saw. We didn't know there was an evac on the way; we thought we was makin' our final stand."

"Shit," Leon laughed. "Talk about a way to start a military career."

Miller chuckled and shook his head. On the other end of the helicopter, Logan and Gerald were pressed against the window. Gerald was writing a letter to his family. Logan was grinding his

molars until his jaw popped and cracked.

"Anyways, we started blastin', and I killed my first Gook; I got a shot into the bastard's eyes when he charged, and his brains went out the back of his head. *BLAM!*" Eli mimed firing his Ithaca, and Leon laughed.

"I got one down, and Miller took out another two," Eli said. "We was having a competition, seeing who could blast the most fish-faced fuckers before we were overrun. There was blood splashin' everywhere, and you couldn't hear nothing over the gunshots and screams. It was hell. It was straight hell, but I was the devil, and I was takin' as many men as I could before I had to go home. Except I was home; I was in 'Nam, and goddamn if I wasn't having the time of my life."

"Sounds like you're getting off on stroking your ego," Logan grumbled.

"I'll give your mama somethin' to stroke," Eli replied.

Nobody laughed. The rotor blades thumped through the silence. Leon glanced back and forth between Logan and Eli.

Logan shifted upright in his seat, his brow furrowed and fists clenched. Eli swallowed and balled his fists.

"God, you're charming," Gerald schmoozed at Eli. "Seriously, what's your address? I need a good lay when I get back to the states, and I could use somebody that knows how to sweet-talk so pretty."

"Careful, I think he's taken," Leon laughed. "If you get between him and his sister, he'll really have a broken home!"

"Watch it," Eli pointed at Leon. "That's West Virginia, not Kentucky."

Gerald rolled his eyes at Logan and slapped him on the shoulder. Logan grunted and leaned back in his seat, deflated and scowling. Gerald turned back to Eli and continued to laugh and joke with him, teasing him for his Southern heritage. While the rest of the squad goofed off, Ryan watched them with a sad smile hidden behind his mask.

They were so unlike his old squad-mates. His men were almost like a family; they bickered and protected each other like brothers. Before he was a captain, when he was just a fresh recruit in Vulture Squad, his team was made of men as cold and hard as granite. They never joked or told stories of adventure and brotherhood.

Ryan's goal as captain was to ensure his men wouldn't end up that way. So far, he had been lucky to keep them alive and sane,

but there was always underlying damage beneath the skin. Ryan just hoped he could keep them from breaking completely. Ryan was shocked out of his thoughts by Ricardo's voice over the speakers.

"We've arrived; hold onto yer butts, we're descending."
"You need to stop spacing out like that, boss," Leon said to Ryan. Ryan looked outside and saw shaggy green mountaintops scythe up through the clouds like the spine of a sea serpent. The walls of the valley climbed higher to box in the helicopter. They dropped haphazardly into the pitch-black belly of the storm. Rain lashed the helicopter's hull and the wind shoved them back and forth.

Ryan's stomach seized; he had the sense of drowning in bottomless fathoms. The rest of the squad squeezed their seats in white-knuckle grips as they waited for the scant moonlight to return. Eli snuck a shot of bourbon while they were blind.

The Father Vulture dropped through the underbelly of the storm. The wind softened, and the rain streamed heavily over the windows. Ryan peered through the eyes of his reflection in the window, and his jaw fell open.

The interior of the valley was vaster than anything Ryan had ever seen in Vietnam. A nearly endless ocean of greenery stretched to the mountains on the horizon. There were no lights in the jungle, and no signs of human settlement. They were truly in the dark heart of the country.

As the helicopter descended, Ryan could scarcely make out a small patch of muddy earth cut from the forest beneath them. When Ryan squinted at it, he could make out a few wooden buildings that were nearly invisible against the rust red mud. It was General Jericho's base, hidden in plain sight deep within enemy territory.

The base was perched on a hilltop and surrounded by dense jungle, with a river curling around the bottom of the hill. With a deep breath, Ryan stood and steadied himself.

"Alright, Vultures, we're landing at General Amadeus Jericho's headquarters," Ryan said. "For those of you that have heard of him, you've probably heard of his legendary temper."

Xavier, Logan, and Gerald nodded. The others stared.

"If you so much as forget to address him as 'Sir', I'll be sweeping up your teeth while Xavier puts your pieces back together. *Do not* make Jericho mad," Ryan said, narrowing his eyes. "That goes especially for you, Eli."

“Why, I never,” Eli said. He put his hands over his chest in feigned surprise. “I’m a southern gentleman.”

“Yeah, and I’m a southern bell,” Gerald said. Leon and Miller laughed.

“Jericho is our superior, so you’ll respect him and do what he says,” Ryan said. He glanced out of the window and saw the tree tops rise above the helicopter. “Looks like we’re here.”

The Father Vulture rocked and bounced as it settled into the clearing, and the rest of the squad stood. Ryan pulled open the side door and waved them into the heavy downpour.

Jericho’s base was primitive at best. It was only two acres wide and surrounded by encroaching forest. There was an infirmary on the right hand side of the clearing, sitting with its back against the tree line. On the left, there were four wooden shacks that Ryan guessed were used as barracks.

In the center of the clearing was a make-shift obstacle course constructed of crates, barbed wire, and oil drums. A team of four Vietnamese men were running through the gauntlet as two Americans dressed in black fatigues fired their rifles and shouted orders. One of the guards wore a woolen mask with a demon’s snarling face painted on it, and the other wore a leather bush hat.

The guard with the bush hat shouted, “Nguyen, duck! Duck, goddammit!”

Nguyen, the Vietnamese boy at the head of the group, dove just as the man with the mask fired a round over his head.

Ryan looked past the obstacle course and saw two more buildings; one was much larger than the others, with a trapezoid face and a pair of heavy steel doors. Ryan assumed that was the armory. To the right of the armory was a wooden cabin not much larger than a trailer.

The door to the cabin swung open, spilling light into the dark, and a man dressed in jeans with a green shirt came running out. As the man came closer, Ryan noticed that he was wearing a green bandana around his mouth. Ryan watched him cautiously as he approached.

The man saluted and shouted, “Captain Baker, I presume?”

Ryan returned the salute. “Yes, sir. And you..?”

“My call-sign is Bishop; I’m in charge of Jericho’s SOG team,” the man replied. He motioned to the obstacle course and said, “Those

two are Shadow and Ozzie. They run the MACV operations. Come on; let's get your men out of the rain. We don't want to keep Jericho waiting."

Bishop turned and led them to the wooden cabin. As they walked, Leon turned to Ryan and asked, "What's MACV-SOG?"

"MACV specializes in training the local militia men in counter-guerilla warfare, and the SOG do reconnaissance work to study enemy behavior, tactics, and settlements," Ryan said. "They're usually involved with the CIA in clandestine black-ops work, so I keep my distance. I've had to work with them before, though, and usually it's to the ends of some means for the Pentagon or the President's bidding."

Andrei opened an eye at the mention of morphine. He remained motionless in the shadows.

Xavier set aside a pair of morphine syringes and started peeling back the layers of gauze from Gerald's torso. The bandages sucked at his skin as they were pulled away. Gerald yelped and kicked his legs against the table but Logan held him down while Xavier tried to keep him calm.

One of the syringes rolled off the table and landed in the palm of Andrei's upturned hand. He slunk back into the corner of the room and started rolling up his sleeve. Ryan and the others were distracted at the windows, scanning for utahraptors beyond the perimeter fence. Andrei plunged the needle into his arm and sank back into a gentle abyss.

"Christ!" Gerald cried, "Kill me now, it fucking hurts! God, kill me now!"

"Shhh," Xavier whispered. "Just be quiet, we can't let those dinosaurs hear you."

Logan stood beside Gerald and gripped his hands. Gerald screamed until Xavier injected morphine into his thigh. Once the opiates took hold, Gerald sank back into Logan's arms and shut his eyes. The pain was there, but heavily diluted. He felt lost within a lucid dream. The shouting of the other men sounded like it was sloughing through molasses to his ears.

Gerald opened his eyes and saw the lost expression of a child on Logan's grimy face. A mask of blood and filth obscured his features; most of it was Gerald's blood.

Despite the morphine, Gerald recognized the look in Logan's eyes. He knew the voices were filling his head. He had seen him

overwhelmed like this years ago, while they were guiding a platoon of marines through the bush.

An irritated soldier had threatened Gerald, but Logan had leapt to his defense and broke the man's arm. It took a lot of negotiating to keep Logan from getting discharged, but Gerald always had a way with words. After the incident, Logan divulged his secret to him. That bond had cemented their friendship, and they were brothers ever since.

Gerald saw the poison in Logan's leaking eyes. Logan's lips trembled with incoherent, breathless words. Gerald knew Logan was on the brink of an episode whenever he attempted to talk back to the faceless phantoms. He was falling into their grasp.

Gerald snapped his fingers in front of Logan's face. "Logan, look at me. You're not looking-look at me, right here."

Logan stared through Gerald. His mind was too far gone.

"Logan," Gerald rasped. He tried to snap his fingers but his arm was pulled down by the gravity of morphine. "Please, Logan, just look at me, I'm right here," he said. "*They* aren't. I'm here. I'm real. Just talk to me, please. Please, Logan, talk to me."

Gerald reached out and squeezed Logan's wrist. Logan flinched, and his eyes opened wider. His eyes focused on Gerald's face and his gaunt cheeks began to twitch. Limpid tears ran down his cheeks.

"They won't-won't stop," Logan choked, "They're saying--"

"Stop," Gerald coughed wetly into his fist. He saw moonlight flickering across the fresh blood on his knuckles. He wiped it off on his shirt and placed his hand on Logan's shoulder, squeezing it.

"Don't listen to them, Logan. They're liars, and they aren't worth listening to." Gerald wheezed. "Just listen to me. Listen. Look around you. What do you see?"

Across the room, Eli yelled, "I seen one! It's behind the fence!"

Logan craned his head. "Everybody's at the windows," he said.

"And they need you. *We* need you," Gerald said. "The voices don't want you. *They* don't want to help us. *They* only want to hurt you. Don't let them hurt you, Logan. None of us want to see you get hurt. We need you, so please, stay with us and help."

Gerald doubled over, retching. Logan seized up and mumbled rapidly. Gerald clutched Logan's shoulders.

"Don't worry- don't worry about me, Logan. Don't look away. Don't look away from what's happening. I know you're scared; we're all scared, but we need you to help."

"I don't want you to die!" Logan wailed. He held Gerald and sobbed, "Please don't leave me Gerald, don't die, don't die on me, don't leave me Gerald, please, please--"

"Logan, calm down!" Gerald said. He stared into Logan's eyes. "I'll be fine."

Liar liar die alone die.

"You're not looking at me Logan, look at me!" Gerald said. "*Look at me!*"

Look die dead alone rot alone rot.

"Look at me!" Gerald said, "Help me! Help us!"

Logan stared blankly. His mind was in a turmoil of voices rising and falling upon each other like swarming roaches. Gerald stared at him, bloodied and broken, but physically *there*. He was concrete, living flesh. He was real; the voices weren't. Logan knew this, but the voices were so strong, so livid and vicious. They were stifling his thoughts. Gerald shook him by the shoulders.

"Logan, look at me," Gerald rasped. "It'll be alright. I know they're blaming you. Don't be ashamed of who you are or anything you've done. You do whatever it takes to help your friends. You're a goddamned hero, Logan. Never forget that."

Logan pushed his palms into his eyes. "I just wish they'd stop, Gerald. I just want it all to stop."

"Logan, *we're* alive," Gerald said. "Keep it that way."

Logan bobbed his head and gulped air. "Okay, Gerald," he said. He stood and held his sniper rifle. He squeezed Gerald's hand.

"A hero," Gerald mumbled. He sank back into unconsciousness and his head lolled to the side. Logan moved his pack under Gerald's head and wiped the blood from his friend's face with a jittering hand. With a deep breath, he held his rifle high and walked across the room to the others. Xavier went to watch Gerald, and Logan stood by Ryan's side.

Ryan glanced at Logan from the corner of his eye. "You holding up alright?"

"Yeah," Logan exhaled. He was trembling. "What's going on?"

"They're here," Ryan said. He pointed to the window.

They looked across the clearing, to the fence hidden amongst the darkened forest. It took a few seconds for Logan's eyes to adjust, but then he saw the large silhouette of a utahraptor pacing along the perimeter. Spots of moonlight slid over its coat of feathers.

Logan swallowed hoarsely and aimed his M40 sniper rifle at the beast. The rest of the men were silent, panting and shifting nervously. The utahraptor moved slowly, taking methodical steps.

It was watching them.

Minutes passed. Wind whistled through the cracks in the windows and rotting fumes seeped into the room like ghosts. Ryan's nostrils flared; it was a familiar scent, like that of bodies piled beneath the sun. Ryan felt the plastic grip of his rifle melt into his hand like chocolate. He heard Eli's boots tapping on the concrete floor.

Bandoliers of ammunition rattled with nervous energy on the bodies of the men. The utahraptor continued its steady pace, back and forth, along the length of the perimeter fence.

The breeze that hissed through the windows chilled the sweat on the exposed part of Ryan's face. He was agitated and restless, ready to fight, but the utahraptor still remained just beyond the fence, silently watching. It was waiting for something...but for what? For the men to attack? A dinosaur couldn't be that smart, could it? Their brains were supposed to be the size of walnuts. They were just stupid lizards. There was no way.

The utahraptor stepped back and faded into darkness.

Ryan and the others pressed against the window to peer out.

"I don't see it," Leon whispered.

Logan was chewing his lip. Miller and Eli were staring out, their noses pushed against the glass.

"Pretty smart for a bird, if you ask me," Miller said.

"Way too smart for a bird," Leon said.

Ryan exhaled slowly. The rest of the men were silent.

There was a low growl outside. The windows shook in their frames. Golden eyes blinked beside Eli's head.

Eli screamed, and the window exploded with the sharp hiss of glass skirting across concrete. Eli stumbled backwards and a utahraptor shoved its head through the gaping window, biting for his throat. The room became filled with screams and piercing gunshots. Eli hit the floor and his shotgun fled his hands. The utahraptor stretched its neck and snapped at his boots.

Ryan emptied his ammunition into the utahraptor's neck and it withdrew from the window with a rumbling growl. The gunshots ceased. Silence encroached.

Eli was panting on the ground.

“What-what the fuck just happened?”

The window beside Leon burst open and he dove for cover. Miller and Logan opened fire, but they were shooting at ghosts; the utahraptor wasn't there. Cold air flooded the room and the men fell silent. Ryan helped Leon to his feet.

“Everybody away from the windows, now!” Ryan said.

“Seriously, what the fuck?!” Eli shouted.

Ryan watched the moonlit clearing through a broken window. Gunpowder stung his nostrils. He took a few plaintive steps forward, his boots crunching the pebbled glass. As he approached, Ryan began to make out the clearing in better detail; the barren ground, the sagging fence, the ferns growing along its sides...where there hadn't been any before.

Ryan opened fire and the utahraptor sprang to its feet, sprinting out of sight. Ryan chased the utahraptor with a string of lead until it was gone. Leon and Miller opened fire as well but Ryan halted them with an upturned fist.

“Conserve your ammo,” he said. “Only fire bursts, and only if you have a clear shot. Get back--Leon, get back from the window!”

“I thought we were fighting lizards, not Charlie!” Miller spat. He ejected the magazine from his rifle and replaced it. It snapped in place and another window shattered, accompanied by a roar. A pair of utahraptors began to climb through two of the windows. Ryan opened fire but the nearest utahraptor knocked the rifle out his hands with a swipe of its talons.

Eli grabbed his shotgun and fired a round into the utahraptor attacking Miller. The utahraptor howled in pain and snapped its jaws over Eli's arm, dragging him through the window. Eli screamed and Miller grabbed him by the ankles. Ryan and Logan grabbed Eli's legs and started pulling. Leon opened fire on the second utahraptor as it dragged itself inside.

The first utahraptor overpowered the men and wrenched Eli out of the window. Ryan, Miller, and Logan fell beside the second utahraptor. The utahraptor bit Ryan on the shoulder and thrashed him like a ragdoll. Ryan howled and jammed his thumb into the predator's eye.

The utahraptor hissed and let go of him, slinking back out of the window. Ryan hit the floor and barked in pain. Miller jumped to his feet and ran to the window, yelling Eli's name.

The shotgun boomed twice and the utahraptors yowled like feral

cats. Miller leaned his head out of the window and saw Eli lying on his back, waving his shotgun with a bloody arm.

“Yipee-kay-yay, motherfuckers!” Eli shouted. “It’s turkey season!” Miller and Leon hoisted Eli inside and pushed him towards Xavier and Gerald. Gerald was half-awake, a pistol in hand. Xavier held his rifle and turned to Ryan.

“How many of them are there?” Xavier asked.

“Just two,” Ryan said. “I think we can hold them off if we just stay away from the windows. Leon, see if you can get some explosives between us and them. The helicopter should be here any minute, so if we just sit tight--“

“Actually, there’s four,” Andrei slurred from the floor. He dragged himself onto a chair and wheezed. “I don’t know where they are, but they’ll find a way in. They always, uh, find a way.”

Glass screeched above their heads. Ryan looked up and saw a second pair of utahraptors on top of the building’s pyramid skylight, furiously clawing at the glass pane. The utahraptor with Logan’s knife stuck in its eye, the Cyclops, fogged the glass with a purring growl.

Everybody stepped back except for Logan, who remained by Gerald’s side. Ryan was transfixed by the Cyclops’s glowing yellow eye until he heard a pair of screams across the room.

The first pair of utahraptors were attempting to haul themselves through the windows again. The entire squad opened fire, pushing the animals out with sporadic gunshots. The utahraptors barked and trotted past the windows, circling the building.

The metal door of the research station was suddenly struck by a powerful impact, and the men turned to face it. They could hear the rasp of claws raking steel. The door shuddered in a constant rhythm as the utahraptors took turns slamming against it, denting the metal inward. Ryan took a step back, feeling his pulse in his ears.

They were surrounded.

“That’s nearly a full ton of muscle hitting that door,” Andrei said.

“And another ton above us. What’s the plan, oh cap-i-tan?”

Ryan ignored Andrei and tried to focus. Snowflakes of glass sprinkled onto his head from above. His nerves were on edge from the constant thumping of the door, the screeching of claws shredding through metal and glass. Logan mumbled nervously in Ryan’s ear like a whimpering mosquito.

Ryan stared at the ceiling. The glass wouldn’t hold for much

longer; the Cyclops carved out a hole and tried to stick its head inside, but the handle of the knife held it back. Ryan was amazed the glass was holding the weight of the utahraptors at all ... Ryan's eyes opened wide.

"Leon, do you have any ammunition for your rocket launcher?"

"Just one," Leon replied.

"Get it out and aim it at the door," Ryan said. He ran to the door and grabbed the handle. He felt the impact of a utahraptor through the metal, and the door shook in its frame.

"When I open the door, fire your rocket through the doorway," Ryan said. "Don't worry about me; just get ready to blow the shit out of whatever's outside. Logan, Xavier, carry Gerald. Eli and Miller, shoot the glass out of the ceiling when I open the door. Andrei-get your ass out of the fucking chair and get over here! Now! That's an order!"

Andrei scampered behind Logan and Xavier as they lifted Gerald off of the table. Eli and Miller stood behind them and aimed their rifles at the utahraptors on the roof. Leon put his LAW launcher on his shoulder and aimed it at the door. He took a deep breath.

Ryan listened as the utahraptors' impacts began to taper off. He unlatched the locks and counted the seconds between their charges. They were becoming half-hearted and slower. There was a brief pause, and Ryan stared at Leon. He counted off his fingers.

"One..."

"Two..."

"Three!"

Ryan threw open the door and dove out of the way as the two utahraptors lunged for the open doorway. Leon fired the rocket and the utahraptors were tossed aside by a thunderous explosion of fire and debris.

Eli and Miller fired their rifles at the roof until the glass panes collapsed in sheets. The Cyclops fell through the open air and crashed onto the tables below. The second utahraptor was ensnared in the support beams, snarling and writhing against the shards of glass. Eli whooped, and Miller dragged him outside as the Cyclops struggled to its feet.

"Now!" Ryan screamed, and they charged into the blaze.

The men sprinted through an ocean of smoke that glowed orange with scattered plumes of fire. Ryan's eyes burned, and he struggled to breathe. Shadows stumbled around him. Leon grabbed onto him,

and he nearly flinched away. When Ryan saw who it was, he slapped him on the back and waved him towards a hole in the fence.

“Go, go!” Ryan coughed. He waved everybody through, one at a time, until he was the only one left in the flickering haze. He turned and saw the dark shapes of the utahraptors striding through the smoke. The Cyclops stared at him from the doorway of the research station, a low, rumbling growl emanating from its silhouetted jaws.

Ryan turned and scrambled through the fence after the others, into the cool depths of the jungle.

They were running blindly, guided only by the fragments of moonlight that fell through the multi-storied canopy. Logan and Xavier struggled with Gerald’s writhing body. The morphine was wearing off, and he was crying out in pain. Logan tried to calm him down, but Gerald’s suffering was immense. His cries became screams, and soon Logan was falling back into the embrace of the voices.

Logan tried to focus on what was going on, but it was impossible. It was sensory overload, a whirlwind of shouting and broad leaves whipping past his face. He looked over his shoulders and saw the utahraptors were gone.

Xavier began to slow. His ears were pricked to a faint sound, a pulse echoing through the valley. He stopped and said, “Ryan, I hear it! I hear the helicopter!”

Ryan dug his heels into the ground and skidded to a halt. He turned to Leon. “Pop a flare, now!”

Leon fumbled through his pack for the flare gun.

“We can’t stop now!” Andrei said. “We haven’t lost them yet, they’re still here somewhere!”

Leon found his flare gun and fired it through a gap in the canopy. The flare burst into a brilliant red firework and arced over the forest. The pulse of the rotor blades grew to a roar and the helicopter rushed overhead, sweeping the canopy with wash. Ryan watched the helicopter fly past and felt his stomach turn. He thought the helicopter had missed them, but then he saw it rotate and bank towards the shore.

It was landing!

Shadows danced in the crimson light of the descending flare. Vegetation churned behind Leon. Ryan screamed as a utahraptor snapped its jaws over the back of Leon’s neck, dragging him

beneath the undergrowth.

Ryan fired his rifle at the utahraptor and the beast snapped at his face, spraying him with bloody spit. Bits of flesh flecked his face.

Another utahraptor pounced onto Eli from behind, sending him sprawling into the brush. Miller opened fire on the utahraptor while Ryan laid fire on the other. Andrei cowered behind Gerald while Logan and Xavier fired their rifles at the circling predators. Leon shrieked in agony. The utahraptor's talons split through the flesh of his stomach and hooked through his intestines. Ryan's heart leapt at the sight, and he kicked the utahraptor in the side of the head, briefly jarring it. The utahraptor slashed its claws through Ryan's jacket and butted him aside.

Leon was frantically squeezing his innards back inside of the gaping wound. Wet, rubbery tissue squished between his fingers. He screamed until his throat was hot and raw, and he passed out.

Ryan reclaimed his rifle from the forest floor and shot the utahraptor several times in the snout, the muzzle-flash illuminating the darkness of the forest. The utahraptor screeched and ducked back into the shadows.

Ryan dragged Leon's body over to Logan and Xavier while Eli and Miller scrambled away from the second utahraptor. The utahraptor circled the group, snapping at them, slashing its claws.

Eli fired a shot, missed, and the utahraptor kicked him in the chest, sending him rolling. The predators were toying with their prey. Ryan and the others opened fire on the utahraptor, driving it further into the brush. Logan was overwhelmed by the chaos; he held Gerald tightly and waved his sniper rifle at the hidden carnivores.

Everybody was shouting, including the voices in Logan's head. Logan was lost within his skull. The utahraptors howled from the darkness, swirling around the men like a whirlpool of crying banshees.

Logan met Gerald's eyes and saw his friend's steely determination. A golden eye blinked over Gerald's shoulder; moonlight shone on bloody steel.

Screams filled Logan's head as the Cyclops hooked its claws into Gerald's pelvis and dragged him away. Logan leapt forward, flailed through the foliage, and grabbed Gerald's wrists.

The ground was soaked in blood. Everybody was screaming;

Vulture Squad, the utahraptors, the voices. All Logan could see was Gerald's wailing face. His screams were shredding through Logan's skull. Burgundy poured dark over Gerald's pearly teeth, running thick down his shrieking face. Logan wrestled with Gerald, fighting to pull him back, until he saw past his friend's face.

Friend freak faggot freak fiend freak

The Cyclops had its claws hooked through Gerald's pelvis nearly a meter away from the rest of his torso. His abdomen had been split completely open, and he was being torn in two. Logan could see the knobs of his vertebrae pushing through stringy tendons.

Logan's heart plummeted. His mind ceased to function. Gerald's animalistic wailing engulfed his senses; his screams were louder than the voices could ever be. Logan never thought Gerald would ever stop screaming. An image of the wounded deinonychus appeared in Logan's mind, and he became placid.

Help help Gerald die help Gerald

Logan didn't notice his own violent sobbing as he fought to hold Gerald's hands. The voices were lost in the din of sound. Spent shell casings rained over his head.

Gerald was blind in his pain, and Logan was sick. The pistol in his hand was warm and damp; its energy was infectious. Logan stroked Gerald's hair and lowered the pistol to his temple. The screaming wouldn't stop.

Gerald Gerald dead dead Gerald Die Gerald

The pistol went off with a *pop*, and Gerald crumpled into Logan's arms. Logan looped his fingers through Gerald's dog tags and slipped them off of his neck as the Cyclops dragged the body away. Logan's lap was drenched. The warmth sank through his clothing and kissed the skin of his thighs.

The voices descended to hissing, callous whispers. The utahraptors were gone, but Logan could hear his best friend's bones being broken in the darkness of the jungle beyond, the predators snarling and snapping at each other.

The sounds of the firefight faded away. The men became silent. Logan couldn't feel the eyes of his squad; he only felt the cold gun in his hand and Gerald's blood cooling between his fingers.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO – NIKITA

The air of the jungle was cold and damp as Nikita dragged Sergei away from the floodplains. Fireflies streaked through the darkness around their heads. Nikita pivoted his AK-47 on his hip as he stared at the mist that was illuminated over the undergrowth by the moonlight. He could hear the distant rumbling groans of dinosaurs; massive herbivores preparing to sleep further in the valley.

Sergei moved like a corpse. Nikita had been pulling him along for hours after Tolstoy had died, but he was too tired to continue acting as a father figure. It wasn't in his nature to nurture; he was happiest when he was alone, drinking and chain smoking while reading by lamp-light. He had to snap Sergei out of his stupor.

Nikita had seen shell shock frequently during the Second World War. During his winter in Stalingrad, he had seen a young man become shell shocked after the boy saw his brother become decimated by a grenade. Nikita had spent hours trying to wake the boy from his stupor, but the boy merely stared through him and gawked.

When Nikita had eventually left to secure their perimeter, he returned to find the boy curled in a fetal position wearing a blanket of powdered snow. The medic told Nikita the boy had died of hypothermia, but Nikita knew otherwise. The boy had died the moment his brother had been killed.

"Enough of this," Nikita grunted. He pushed Sergei onto a log and crouched to eye-level with him. Sergei seemed to be staring through Nikita at a distant memory. Tolstoy's blood was caked to Sergei's face. Nikita wiped it off and rubbed his hands off on his pant legs. "Sergei, you need to pay attention," Nikita said. "We aren't in the wetlands anymore- we're in the jungle, and we're lost. I need you to pay attention to what I'm saying, okay? Sergei, are you looking at me?"

Sergei's eyes focused on Nikita. His lips trembled delicately.

"Tolstoy is dead, Sergei," Nikita said. "He's dead, and he's not coming back."

Sergei's pale, bloodied face crumpled like tissue. Tears filled his eyes and streaked through the blood on his cheeks. He gulped air and said, "He's back there, he knows what to do, he can help us, he's--"

"Dead, Sergei," Nikita said. "He's dead, and he isn't coming back for

us.”

“You’re *wrong!*” Sergei wailed, doubling over. “He’s not – not dead, he’s going to come back. Just wait, I know he’ll be back, please-”

“Sergei!” Nikita seized Sergei by the shoulders and shook him. “You saw him die; we both did! You need to wake up and realize this or else we’re both going to die too, don’t you see? We’ll die out here if you don’t snap out of it. Now say it with me; Tolstoy is dead. He’s dead and he’s not coming back. Say it with me, Sergei--“

Sergei wailed and clutched his sides. The young man felt like he was drowning. Tolstoy’s death kept replaying in his head. The blood, the screaming; the only father figure he had ever known, mangled and torn limb from limb. He felt like he would die too, and he screamed in pain. He felt each piercing beak stabbing through his gut, the impacts and the frigid swamp water. He screamed until his throat was raw.

Nikita slapped Sergei across the face, and the pain vanished. Cold mist licked his tears. Tree frogs chirped above his head, and bats chittered and squeaked beneath the understory canopy.

“Look at me,” Nikita said.

Sergei was silent.

Nikita slapped him again, harder.

“Look at me, Sergei!”

Nikita caught Sergei’s eyes and saw that the damage had been done. The pain seeped from Sergei’s saucer-sized pupils.

“What would Tolstoy do?” Nikita asked. “You want to make him proud, don’t you? Do what he would have done. What would Tolstoy do?”

Sergei swallowed. “We must keep going,” he mumbled. “We must fulfill the mission.”

“Good enough,” Nikita said. “So what would he do to fulfill the mission?”

“Kill,” Sergei whispered. “We must kill the Americans as we were trained to do, for the motherland. We must kill the bastard Americans that killed Aleks.”

“Now you’re really starting to sound like Tolstoy,” Nikita mumbled gravely.

“What else are we supposed to do?!” Sergei shouted. “There is no other way! We have to kill them all, those were Borodin’s orders! We have to do what he said for the betterment of our homeland!”

“How easy is it to kill, Tolstoy-” Nikita bit his tongue. “-Sergei?”

How easy is it to take a man's life? To take away somebody's son or brother or father, how easy is it? You've never committed violence. You've never taken a life. How easy do you think it is?"

"Tolstoy always spoke as if it were easy," Sergei mumbled. "He was always talking about the glory of killing for your motherland, how it was the most noble and selfless thing a man could do, to put himself through that gravest task. It is an honor."

Nikita shook his head. "Tolstoy was not a normal man, Sergei," he said. "Ever since he took his first life, he became different. He was always able to take a man's life without hesitation or mercy. He was a wolf. I've seen his cruelest acts. Maybe he was born that way; maybe some people were born to kill, but not most people."

"For every man like Tolstoy, there were millions of us who couldn't live with what we had done. We still suffer for our acts with psychosis and shell-shock. I pray to god you aren't like Tolstoy, Sergei. For your sake."

"What would you know, you tired old drunk?!" Sergei snapped. "All this talk, yet you're still serving men like Borodin! What do you care? Hypocrite!"

"I *have* nothing else," Nikita said. "Look at me; what else is there? War is all I have ever known! I was a teenager when the war started; I was never allowed another life! But you, you're young. You can change. You can overcome what's happened and still live with your sanity intact. You could go home and go to school, or start a family, or do anything you want. You don't have to let this be your life, you can change!"

"I don't want anything else, I want *this*," Sergei said. "I want to be like Tolstoy. A hero."

Nikita clenched his eyes shut and rubbed his brow. "Tolstoy was killing Nazi invaders; he had a purpose to fight. *We* don't. We don't know these men we've been sent to kill, what they're doing here, or why Borodin wants them dead. Borodin has lied to us, Sergei. He had to have known there were monsters in this valley; why else would he build such high walls around his base? He was trying to keep them out."

"What does that matter now?" Sergei asked. "All that matters is killing these American monsters so we can go home."

"Because, we don't know why Borodin wants them to die," Nikita said. "We don't have to kill them. He wanted us to take their general, right? We can take him without taking any other lives. All

we have to do is use stealth. We can sneak in, grab him, and sneak back out. We could have him back in two days, and we'll be free. We don't need to kill anybody to fulfill the mission."

"You're crazy," Sergei grunted. "There is no other way. They all must die."

"You might not understand this yet, but war is a cancer," Nikita said. "It saps your spirit and sucks away all the joy and worth from your life. Men like Tolstoy can function with it, but you aren't like him. When you take away somebody's life, you're ending a story; you're taking away a living human being from the world."

"Once you become a part of the war, the war becomes a part of you. You will never be free of it. Do you want that?" Nikita asked. He was desperate to make Sergei see. He stepped forward, and his features were mired in the shadows and moonlight. "Do you want to live with these mistakes for the rest of your life?"

Sergei was mulling over a response when he suddenly heard an unusual sound. It had been so long since he had least heard it that it seemed alien.

Laughter.

Nikita noticed it as well, and he looked over his shoulder. At the top of a nearby hill, a fiery aura glowed through the foliage. Sergei shoved past Nikita and scrambled uphill, clawing and climbing up the muddy incline. Nikita followed him as quickly as his tired legs would allow.

"Wait," Nikita hissed at Sergei's back, "Wait!"

Sergei crested the hill and found a fence hidden amongst a stand of palm trees. Laughter leaked through the spaces between the skinny trunks. Nikita came to his side and swept open the curtain of foliage, revealing an open clearing a few acres wide. Windows glowed yellow with dim lamps from several buildings in the center of the clearing.

A group of men were gathered in a circle around a barrel fire amongst the crates of an obstacle course. Some were Vietnamese; others were Americans. Some wore masks. Sergei grabbed his rifle but Nikita pulled him backwards.

"Tomorrow," Nikita growled. "At dawn, we will take their general. But we need to clear our heads. Let's get away from here and start a fire. We'll get our rest and make a plan, but not now. Leave them be."

Sergei looked from Nikita to the glowing fire. He savored the

warmth on his skin.

“Alright,” Sergei whispered. “But by dawn, their base will burn...” Nikita pulled Sergei back downhill. Sergei glanced over his shoulder and watched the fire fade from sight. He squeezed the cold steel of Tolstoy’s Dragunov sniper rifle in his hands and he felt his stomach spin sickeningly. His heartbeat was back in his throat. Nikita be damned, Sergei was going to kill them all. Tolstoy would have wanted it.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE– EVAC

The gunshot rang fresh in Logan’s ears. Nobody dared to lift the silence that had followed. Ambient sounds returned to the jungle; the rush of the river filled the silence, and the breeze hissed through the fronds of the palm trees at the edge of the forest. The helicopter thrummed from the river’s sandy shore.

Logan watched the smoke leaking from the pistol’s barrel with twitching eyes. Gerald’s blood had turned cold on his skin. The other men stared at Logan, stunned beyond speech. Eli’s eyes were lidless.

“Jesus,” Eli muttered. “What the fuck, Logan?”

Logan was mute. He felt the pistol’s weight in his limp hand. His skin appeared to be covered in flaking red paint. The first time he had seen blood so vibrantly, it had been splattered across the cheap wallpaper in the hallway of his childhood home.

During Logan’s first schizophrenic episode, he had shot his abusive, alcoholic father in the head. The ring of blood was like a halo above his father’s grey face; a crimson painted phoenix rising

from a shattered skull.

Logan couldn't remember what his mother had said; all that he could recall hearing were the voices. They were blaming him for what they had convinced him to do, as they always were and always would be. He ran away immediately afterward and never saw his mother again after that night. He had only been fourteen. "Why'd you do it?" Eli asked. "He didn't have to die."

Logan knew Gerald had to die. He saw the same animalistic desperation in Gerald's eyes that he had seen in the suffering deinonychus. They had both screamed for help, transcending speech to beg for mercy.

Logan had seen Gerald's soul screaming for release behind those blood-shot eyes. Logan had to free him from his cage of flesh and bone. It was his responsibility to help Gerald escape his suffering. He would never let Gerald die in the jaws of a voracious predator. He would never let Gerald suffer.

"Come on, Logan, say something!" Eli said. His voice began to shake. "Just fucking say something, goddammit!"

"Leave him alone, Eli," Ryan said.

"He killed Gerald!" Eli shouted. "He fucking *killed Gerald!*"

"I said that's enough, Eli!"

Fucking Gerald fucking killed Gerald he killed you killed Gerald you killed him.

The voices looped and distorted behind Logan's ear drums. He didn't fight against their pressing weight. They smothered the words of the other men. The cacophony in Logan's skull was disorienting. His hand that had cradled Gerald's head was tremulous. He clenched and unclenched his fist in a rapid succession until it became a blur of red; an exposed heart beating in the moonlight.

"Say something, Logan!" Eli cried. "Just fucking say something!"

"Goddammit, Eli, shut up!" Ryan spat.

Such sweet such such sweet yes sweet Gerald dead fucking dead you sweet shit

Gerald's eyes were a crisp speckled blue, like robin eggs. There was a scar from a childhood fight that bisected his hairline. His square jaw and high cheekbones used to make the nurses and native girls swoon. His teeth were chiseled pearls that were currently stained red and littered across the forest floor.

Logan plucked a tooth and observed it in the moonlight. He wanted to prod the roof of his mouth with the barrel of his blood-stained pistol, crack it against his teeth until they snapped out of his gums. He longed for the release of the trigger pull, and without Gerald to stop him, he might finally do it.

Do it do it do it shit scum do it die dead deserve to die fucking die like Gerald.

Ryan crouched in front of Logan. "We have to go, Logan. We'll deal with what you did when we get out of here, but right now we have an evac waiting for us."

Logan nodded and smeared his hand through the blood on his own face. Eli groaned, turning away, and Miller crossed himself. Ryan pulled Logan to his feet and looked at Leon, writhing on the ground. Xavier was crouched beside him, wrapping gauze around his waist.

"How is he?" Ryan asked. "Can we get him to the helicopter?"

"We can move him, but we're out of morphine, so he's going to suffer," Xavier said. "I'm not sure where that second syringe went. I might have lost it back in the research station, but I doubt it."

"Blame the junkie," Miller said. He pointed at Andrei, wheezing and curled in a sweating ball at his feet. Andrei's eyes rolled in their sunken sockets.

"I...I don't know what you're...talking...about," he drawled.

"*Piece of shit*," Miller said, kicking him hard in the ribs. Andrei yelped pitifully.

"Leave him alone, Miller," Ryan said. "Xavier, help me carry Leon. Andrei, stick close to us. Logan, watch our backs. Miller and Eli, watch our sides. We can't waste any more time, let's move."

Leon groaned as Ryan and Xavier lifted him and slung his arms over their shoulders. Blood soaked through the gauze and trickled down his pants. Ryan and Xavier carried him as quickly and gently as they could through the waist-high foliage.

Leon's face was ashen in the dark. He squeezed his eyes shut and hissed through grit teeth.

"You'll be alright, kid," Ryan said. "Just focus on your breathing. That's good. Nice and slow. Take it easy. We'll be alright."

Vibrations moved through the earth beneath their feet. The trees swayed around them and the nocturnal animals took flight, scampering through the underbrush and canopy. Ryan's eyes

opened wide and he quickly scanned their surroundings.

The jungle turned silent. The sour aroma of rotting flesh filled Ryan's nostrils. He stopped walking and felt the powerful tremors moving through his bones. A guttural growl rippled through the forest and the men briefly halted. Ryan felt a horrible fear rise in his gut and he began to move more quickly.

"Double time, Vultures!" Ryan shouted.

The river bank was only a hundred feet away. They could close the distance in seconds if they sprinted, but not with Leon and Andrei. Ryan grunted and wrestled Leon's arm over his shoulder. It was like handling a bag of sand, sagging heavily over his neck. Xavier growled and hoisted Leon upright. Leon's legs were dragging through the soil.

Eli and Miller chased Andrei towards the edge of the forest. Logan staggered behind them, pointing his rifle at the depths of the jungle beyond.

The ground quaked as if it were being moved. Ryan heard trees creaking and snapping against a powerful force. He scanned the darkness until he saw it-- the Father T. rex. The behemoth moved as an immense shadow through the forest, snorting and huffing as it followed the scent of blood in the air.

"Must go faster," Leon hissed.

"If you went easy on the protein, this wouldn't be a problem," Xavier grunted.

Miller, Eli, and Andrei broke into a sprint. Ryan and Xavier stumbled into a jog behind them. Logan grabbed Leon's legs and helped to lighten the load.

Ryan's heart seized when he caught the T. rex's eyes. Its lips were curled back in a toothy snarl. The T. rex bellowed and the sound struck Ryan like an awesome wave. He broke into a sprint with Xavier and Logan, haphazardly dragging Leon through the brush.

The shore was thirty feet away. The T. rex barreled through the forest, crushing vegetation underfoot, shouldering through the tree trunks. Ryan panted and stumbled. The shore was twenty feet away.

The T. rex trampled so close that Ryan could feel the spit flying from its jaws as it howled at his backside. The pounding footsteps made Ryan lose his footing and he hit the ground. Xavier and Logan fell with him and staggered to their feet, dragging Leon through the sand as he screamed.

Ryan scrambled forward and felt the T. rex towering over him,

the huge snout lunging forward, its teeth whistling through the wind.

Ryan tumbled out of the forest and hit the shore on his hands and knees. The T. rex burst through the stand of trees behind him, toppling over several trunks onto the beach.

Ryan dove away from a falling tree and felt the impact of its weight strike the sand beside him. Eli and Miller pulled him upright and they sprinted for the helicopter. Xavier and Logan were already lifting Leon inside.

Ryan turned and saw the T. rex thundering closer, its head lowered and jaws opening to snatch him whole. Ryan's screams were consumed by the roaring behemoth. Ryan clawed his way into the helicopter with the others and they pressed against the back wall.

"What the fuck is that thing?!" Ricardo, the pilot, screamed.

"Shut up and get us out of here!" Ryan shouted.

The T. rex slowed as it approached the roaring helicopter. The beast took hesitant steps around the whirring rotor blades. The T. rex was beautiful in the full moonlight; its iridescent feathers shone like emeralds and onyx through its crest and mane.

The T. rex held its head high as it sniffed the air, watching the men inside the cabin. Ryan spread his arms and held his men back. The T. rex swung its head at the helicopter and clacked its jaws shut like a gunshot. Its teeth glinted dark black with fresh blood.

The helicopter started its ascent, and the T. rex roared, rattling the windows. Ryan fished a smoke grenade from his backpack and flung it outside. The grenade popped and hissed, frothing plumes of white smoke. The rotor blades churned the smoke into a blinding whirlwind. The T. rex bellowed and barked in confusion.

"Hurry, Ricardo!" Ryan yelled.

The shadow of the T. rex circled the helicopter like a shark in the grey abyss. Ryan aimed his rifle through the open cabin door. The behemoth's growls drowned out the helicopter's engine as they slowly ascended. Ryan peered into the smoke and saw the boxy skull of the T. rex pass by at eye level. Xavier pulled Ryan backwards and the T. rex snapped its jaws shut where his head had been.

Everybody screamed and pulled themselves back against the opposite wall. The T. rex shoved its snout into the cabin as the men cowered away from the clacking jaws. The beast roared, filling the

small chamber with the overpowering sound.

“Shit!” Eli screamed, pumping his Ithaca. *“Shit!”*

Eli fired his shotgun at the behemoth’s snout and it reared its head back with a snarl. The sudden movement made the helicopter swing precariously. The T. rex lunged and crunched the landing skid in its jaws.

The helicopter was wrenched down and Eli tumbled out of the door with a scream. Miller shouted and dove after him, and Ryan grabbed Miller to him from falling out as well. Alarms mixed with the men’s screams and red lights flashed throughout the dark cabin.

Ryan stuck his head out the window and saw Eli clinging to a hook on the undercarriage. His boots bounced against the dinosaur’s clenched jaws.

“Get me offa this thing!” Eli screamed.

Ryan and Miller quickly hoisted Eli inside. Ryan pushed everybody into the back of the helicopter, then grabbed onto the door handle and aimed his rifle out at the T. rex’s snout.

“Hang on!” Ryan shouted, and he pulled the trigger.

The T. rex let go of the landing skid with a bark of pain and the helicopter was thrown high into the air. The helicopter rocked wildly back and forth and everybody fought to stay in their seats. The shrill alarms of the helicopter screamed in unison with the men. Ryan clutched his seat, feeling his heartbeat rise up to his skull. Leon passed out mid-shriek and Eli laughed maniacally, raising his flask.

The helicopter slowly leveled out as it continued to ascend. In a matter of seconds, the T. rex became miniscule beneath them. The alarms died off, and the T. rex’s echoing roars faded away. Ryan wiped the sweat from his brow and let go of his breath. It was over; they were going home.

Cold air flooded into the cabin from the open door, but Ryan didn’t have the energy to close it. His eyes glazed over the casualties; Leon was treading the fine line of life and death, and Andrei was catatonic from the morphine. Eli was slugging back the bourbon in his flask with reckless abandon. Logan hugged his knees in the seat beside him, shell-shocked beyond recognition.

Gerald was gone. The gravity of his death weighed on Ryan like six feet of soil. He was going to have to do something about what Logan had done. He knew what it was like to end somebody’s life out of mercy; he had done it before as a rookie in Vulture Squad.

“Where’s the back-up, Ricardo?” Ryan shouted over the chopping rotor blades. “Where’s the black ops team?”

A Vietnamese boy stuck his head into the cabin. Ryan recognized him; his name was Nguyen, and he was one of the Panthers that the MACV-SOG team had been training. Christ, he looked like he was barely eighteen, let alone old enough to handle a rifle. They sent him as back up?

Ryan spat with disdain. Jericho could go to hell. As soon as they returned, he would knock Jericho out cold and leave. Ryan was done with this mission, done with Jericho’s orders, done with this war. All he wanted to do was to go home and sleep in his own bed. The Russians could have this valley and all of the dinosaurs in it. All that mattered to Ryan was getting his men home alive.

Ryan ground his molars as tears crept into the corners of his eyes. His breath shuddered through his throat, and he tightened his lips to keep a whimper from leaking out. He stared at the walls of the valley beyond, the stars suspended in black silk. He was afraid those stars would come crashing down on them. Those falling stars that had killed the dinosaurs had killed his closest friends. Mortars and meteors; death streaking through the night sky.

On the night that Ryan’s youth had ended, he had slipped nearly a dozen dog tags from the decimated corpses of his closest friends. He thumbed Gerald’s dog tags in his pocket, still slick with blood.

The human body was a delicate vessel of flesh and bone. A single bullet could sever a vein and drain the life from a screaming man; a landmine tapped by a toe could shatter a body like glass. Fire consumed flesh like it did kindling, indifferent to the scent of skin being seared or a log being cooked. Ryan had seen it all, and now he knew what it was like to see a best friend be ripped in half by a predatory dinosaur.

It was all his fault. He knew this as true as he knew the staring moon. He could count back every mistake that had led to Gerald being slain in Logan’s arms, and it all traced back to him. It was his fault that Logan’s mind was broken beyond repair and that Leon was dying at his feet. The guilt was like a cancer spreading beneath his skin.

Gerald’s screams tore Ryan’s thoughts asunder. He heard the audible wet rip of intestines behind his ear drums, and his eyes bulged out. He lost his balance.

Ryan tugged down his mask and vomited through the open

doorway. Miller came to his side, but Ryan waved him away and covered his face in shame.

Ryan wiped the bile from his lips and pulled his mask back on. He didn't know how Miller could believe in god, or how anybody in a war could. He had seen enough to know that god didn't exist in this land. Ryan could imagine God existing where humans didn't maim and murder each other, but not here. Certainly not here.

Something whistled from below. Ryan narrowed his eyes and saw smoke streaking up through the canopy, towards the helicopter. Ryan leapt back and grabbed a tether on the ceiling.

"RPG!" Ryan screamed, "Hold on to something!"

A rocket-propelled grenade struck the tail of the helicopter and erupted with a concussive blast that made the helicopter lurch drunkenly. Everybody tumbled in the cabin. Fire and smoke swallowed the helicopter in a hellish tornado, and the emergency alarms screamed back to life.

Ricardo spat and swore as the control panel sparked. Nguyen stumbled into the cabin, choking and clawing at his scorched face. Xavier and Ryan held Leon's limp body inside of the spinning helicopter. They were falling towards the canopy, lost in a tailspin. Bourbon-flavored vomit burst from between Eli's lips.

Gravity dragged Miller from his seat towards the yawning doorway. He scratched helplessly at the steel floor. Eli held onto his seat and stretched his arm towards Miler as far as he could reach. The chords in his neck popped with the strain of it.

Miller clawed towards Eli, but the swinging of the helicopter pulled him further outside. Eli grit his teeth and craned his arm out further, brushing the metal floor with his fingertips.

Nguyen tripped over his own feet and rolled out of the helicopter, knocking Miller out with him.

Eli screamed as he watched Miller and Nguyen plummet through the open air. He let go of his seat and he was flung by gravity towards the door. Ryan grabbed Eli by the belt and held him back.

Eli stuck his head out of the doorway and howled, "*Miller!!!*"

The wind lashed Eli's face and sucked the air from his lungs. Ryan tugged him back inside and held him down. Eli screamed and fought against Ryan's grip.

The helicopter evened out and bounced through the open air. Ryan shoved Eli into a seat and pulled the door shut. He glanced out the window, logged coordinates into his head, and noted any

visible landmarks. Ryan noticed a hilltop rising above the forest nearby, with a rocky peak jutting through the tree tops. Eli shoved him aside and fought for the door.

“Ricardo, set us down!” Eli shouted. “We lost Miller!”

“Sit down, Eli!” Ryan snapped.

Eli leapt to his feet and climbed half-way into the cockpit.

“Ricardo, put us down!” His voice was high-pitched and delirious.

“We have to get Miller! I’ll get him myself, just set us down!”

Ryan jerked Eli out of the cockpit and threw him into his seat. Eli jumped to his feet again, but Ryan punched him in the jaw, knocking him back down.

Eli stared at Ryan, stunned. He jumped to his feet and was immediately struck again in the jaw. His head bounced off of the wall with a *whang*. He put a hand to the back of his head and stared at Ryan.

“Sit down and shut up, Eli!” Ryan shouted. His clenched fists shook. “That’s an order!”

Eli’s jaw throbbed and swelled beneath his fingers. He glared at Ryan with pure malice. Everyone stared. Ryan flicked the blood from his knuckles.

“We’re going back to Jericho’s base, and then we’re going to come back for Miller, I promise,” Ryan said. “But Leon’s dying, for Christ’s sake. We have to save him while we still can. We won’t leave Miller or Nguyen behind, but I’m not going to let Leon die when we can still save him, so just sit down and sober up. Are we clear?”

Eli ground his teeth. His eyes were twitching. Ryan grabbed him by the jaw.

“*Are we clear?!*” Ryan shouted.

“Yes!” Eli yelled. Ryan let go of him, and Eli grasped his jaw.

Xavier stared at them.

Eli doubled over and sobbed drunkenly into his hands.

“I don’t want him to die, Ryan,” he said. “He never left me behind, I can’t leave ‘im. I can’t. I won’t...”

Ryan sighed and sat down beside Eli. He put his arm over his shoulder. “We’ll get him, Eli. I promise. Just sober up. It’ll be okay.” Logan knocked his head against the wall and mumbled to the voices. Xavier checked Leon’s vitals and chewed his beard. Andrei was wheezing on the floor beside them.

The helicopter groaned and shook against the wind. Ryan’s head

was hollow. He held Eli like a child and listened to his damaged friends as they flew south through the empty abyss of night.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR– GOD SAVE US

The sun climbed above the dark pit of the valley and burned through a burgundy sky. Birds sang a chorus as they danced in the tawny eye of the sun, and the whoops and squeals of waking monkeys poured from the walls of the mountains. Steam rose from the undergrowth and climbed through the tree-tops, mixing into smoky clouds that hovered over the canopy.

Sergei savored the morning heat coursing through his frigid bones. The Dragunov rifle weighed a world in his hands as he stared through the rifle's scope at the American and Vietnamese men mingling beyond the perimeter fence. A predatory hunger was forming within his gut.

Sergei had spent the previous night curled in a ball beneath the undergrowth vegetation while stagnant water dripped onto him and insects skittered over his body. The blood burned through his veins like immolated oil.

Aleksandr's mutilated face flashed through Sergei's mind and he tightened his trigger finger. He was ready to slaughter the Americans, but Nikita had a plan. They were going to use stealth to take them by surprise.

Sergei choked on his thick tongue. His throat was crackling dry, and he had no water left in his canteen. He was no longer captivated by the exotic allure of the jungle; all he wanted was to get back to Russia and forget about this godless land. He distracted himself by fiddling with the rifle; he zeroed the scope, checked the ammunition in his magazines, clicked the bolt in place.

The Dragunov seemed to emit its own energy that coursed through Sergei's clammy palms. It was like a holy relic, some ancient artifact bestowed upon him by a forefather.

Sergei swallowed hoarsely as he let the crosshairs rest on the back of a young Vietnamese boy's head.

He would make Tolstoy proud.

Nikita couldn't will himself to move.

A veil of palms separated Nikita from the sun-bleached soil of the American base. He didn't believe that the Americans had murdered Aleksandr; it had to have been one of the creatures loose in the

valley. That did little to quell his fear of the Americans, however.

Nikita had previously encountered American soldiers when he fought in Korea, and they had been brutally efficient combatants. They always sought the swift destruction of any aggressor.

Nikita knew that all that separated him from his dance along the lines of life and death were the palm fronds he was cowering behind. One more step and lead would fly at sonic speeds to tear his flesh to ribbons and render his bones to dust. Bile burned in the back of his throat. The AK-47 shook in his hands.

He would give anything in the world to be back in his bunk at Borodin's compound, sipping pilfered vodka and reading *War and Peace*. He was halfway through the novel when Viktor had assigned them with this suicide mission.

The thought of Viktor and Borodin made Nikita's blood boil. Nikita knew that he and Sergei were just pawns in Borodin's greater game of chess. Capturing the American general was the only thing keeping Nikita from finishing his book. He would go AWOL if he failed; he just wanted to be free of the machine that he had been a cog in for so long. This unlucky American was his ticket home.

Nikita's thoughts of *War and Peace* propelled him to slip through the palm fronds and slink low beneath the hovering sun.

The clearing behind the Americans' crude tin and timber shelters was empty. Nikita could hear the shouting and laughter of the men on the other sides of the buildings; it was the most terrifying thing Nikita had ever heard.

The world seemed alien in Nikita's eyes; his senses were suspended in a state of hyper-awareness. Every sound seemed to be as loud as a gunshot in his ears, filling his head. His heart felt like it would burst, it was pumping so aggressively.

Nikita sprinted across the clearing towards the back of Jericho's tin trailer. His footfalls were mute against the dirt. When he entered the shadow of the trailer, his boots sank through the half-hardened mud. The Americans and Vietnamese laughed as if they were safe. Nikita heard padded footsteps growing near. His heart leapt and he brought the AK-47 to his cheek. He didn't want to take a life, but he kept his finger on the trigger. If the approaching adversary found him, it would all be over. His life hung in the open air, gripped by each footstep. He laid on his belly and burrowed deeper into the mud.

A shadow fell on the ground before him. Sweat beaded his

forehead. He prayed he wouldn't have to pull the trigger. He didn't blink until he saw the legs swing past his face; they were long and lovely, white like milk, with tender feet slipped through red-stained sandals. Nikita bit his lip.

A young woman passed by, unaware of Nikita's presence. She was wearing olive khaki shorts with a doctor's white overcoat. Nikita's jaw fell open. The woman was gorgeous; a dream passing through a nightmare.

The young lady pulled her long black hair into a ponytail and stepped into the infirmary, shutting the door behind her. Nikita exhaled and let his head sink into the mud. He quietly thanked god and crawled forward, peering around the corner of the building. On the other side of the building, Nikita saw a white man in khaki fatigues with a bush hat relaying instructions to a group of Vietnamese boys that appeared to be too young to even buy cigarettes. Another man wearing black fatigues with a demon-emblazoned mask stood off to the side, cradling a Remington shotgun.

Nikita tasted his bile again. He glanced at the section of the tree-line where Sergei was hiding and saw the sunlight blink on the Dragunov's scope.

With a shaky thumbs-up, Nikita raised his rifle and tried to mentally prepare himself for a sprint. It was up to Sergei to distract the men with sporadic shots while Nikita found their target. He sincerely hoped Sergei wasn't half the ruthless wolf of a man that Tolstoy had been.

Adrenaline rushed through Sergei's body. He could see the sweat glistening on the Vietnamese boy's forehead. Sergei didn't believe in souls or heaven and hell. He imagined that taking a life was no more than pulling a trigger and separating mind from body. Yet somehow, he couldn't fight the tension in his trigger finger. It seemed inconceivable to kill a man; impossible, even.

Sergei saw Aleksandr's mouth hanging open in a shocked gape. Tolstoy's agonized screams echoed from the depths of Sergei's skull.

Sergei ground his teeth and slowly squeezed his finger, feeling the tension in the trigger building towards a climatic release. He tasted blood where he had bitten into his tongue. With a tightly held breath, he counted the seconds towards the release of the bullet.

Tolstoy would have been proud.

“...So with that said, we’re going to be doing practice drills in the jungle today,” Ozzie, the man with the bush hat, said. “Shadow and I will pursue until you get to the extraction point-- the patrol boat down by the river.

“Remember to stick together, stay low, and listen to the sounds around you; pay attention to every sensation. Focus on what doesn’t fit. If the jungle seems quieter than usual, be on the lookout. Viet Cong fight by means of hit-and-run; you never know when a firefight is going to occur.”

Pham Chi Bao, the boy standing across from Ozzie, opened his mouth to speak and he was cut off by the sudden *crack* of a gunshot. His head split open like a watermelon, spraying slushied brain matter and fragments of bones across Ozzie’s face. Everybody dove for cover, and Ozzie barked, “Contact! Man down!”

Ozzie scrambled for cover behind the crates that made their obstacle course. The Vietnamese boys where chattering wildly in their quick dialect. Ozzie grabbed his Stoner-63, a heavy machine gun, and sprayed bullets at the tree line. Another gunshot split the air and chipped the corner of the crate he was hiding behind. Ozzie ducked down and whipped his machine gun around the opposite corner, laying heavy fire.

The sniper shots ceased. Ozzie scanned the fringe of forest for any sign of human life-- smoke from a rifle barrel, or light glinting on glass. The palm trees along the perimeter danced in the breeze. Silence returned. The Vietnamese boys whimpered to each other. Ozzie spat, and a gunshot broke the silence. A bullet slammed into his shoulder and he was thrown backwards off of his feet. The Vietnamese boys started screaming, and Ozzie scrambled back behind cover, squeezing his bloody gunshot wound. A stifled scream ripped through his clenched jaws. Shadow, the man in the mask, rolled his eyes.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me, you fuggin’ prick!” Ozzie yelled. “I just got shot!”

“So long as you’re alive,” Shadow grunted, and he fired his shotgun at the forest. The shot that was fired back nearly took the mask off of Shadow’s face.

Shadow ducked and grumbled, “Charlie shits, can’t even hit a target when it’s staring them in the face...”

Ozzie’s pain was replaced with rage. He clutched his Stoner-63 machine gun and released a volley of fire at the jungle, then lobbed

a grenade. Thunder struck the forest and a pair of trees toppled over into the clearing. Ozzie fired his rifle into the smoke, drawing a line of lead back and forth along the perimeter.

Pham Chi's brain matter was gummed into Ozzie's beard. Disgust slurried with his bloodlust. The Vietnamese boys found their fallen rifles and joined the firefight. Toxic energy filled the air.

Ozzie was going to make the shooter pay.

Nikita couldn't believe his eyes.

He saw the bullet shatter the boy's skull before he had even heard the gunshot. In the blink of an eye, a boy's face had become grisly pulp. He felt the report of the shot echoing in his ears. If he ever saw Sergei alive again, he would wring the young bastard's neck.

The explosive firefight shocked Nikita out of his thoughts, and he wheeled around the corner of the building, creeping past before he could be seen. The adrenaline made him feel weightless. He grabbed the handle of the front door to Jericho's office and twisted it; it was unlocked. He swung the door open and stepped inside, AK-47 raised, and kicked the door shut behind him. The cacophony of violence drowned his every sound.

The boy's skull burst in the darkness.

Nikita blinked and saw an empty room. Satellite photos and maps covered the back wall. A wooden desk sat in the center of the room, covered in paperwork.

Nikita scanned the room over the barrel of his rifle. The firefight rattled the walls. He slowly approached the desk. His pulse throbbed in his ears. Each footstep felt like a mile. He loomed over the desk and swept his hand through the paperwork, spilling it onto the floor. There was silence. He craned over the desk to see behind it.

The desk was upturned and thrown onto Nikita. A whirlwind of paper filled the air. Nikita kicked his way out from under the desk and scrambled away. He saw Jericho's boots swing around the desk and he was struck in the face, momentarily blinded by lights flashing behind his eyes.

Nikita howled and thrust his hands out. His palm connected with a swinging bottle, and the glass shattered against the bones in his wrist. He cried out in pain and pulled his hand against his chest, backpedaling wildly.

Jericho walked calmly towards him, the neck of the broken bottle in hand. Nikita had seen numerous men maimed in bar fights; panic

burst through him and he swung his foot into the back of Jericho's knee.

The bottle-neck flew from Jericho's hand and skipped across the floor. Nikita threw himself onto Jericho and slammed his elbow into the base of his neck. Jericho yelped and his nose crumpled against the floor. Nikita climbed on top of him and wrapped his hands around his neck, tugging back.

Jericho swung his arm back and elbowed Nikita in the temple. Nikita fell and hit the carpet. Jericho climbed on top of him and dug his fingers into Nikita's throat. Nikita gasped and clawed for Jericho's face; out of reach.

"Little commie pigshit," Jericho spat in Nikita's face. "I'll fucking end you, ruskie piece of shit."

Nikita kned Jericho in the crotch and slung him off. Jericho choked and grabbed himself, crawling away.

"Oh no you don't," Nikita growled, and he leapt onto Jericho. They rolled across the floor, cussing and growling, throwing fists. Nikita took a knee in his gut and gasped. Jericho choked as a palm slammed into his windpipe. His fingers carved into Nikita's cheeks.

Nikita roared and slammed Jericho's head against the side of the desk. Jericho went limp and Nikita tossed him off. Rage clouded his thoughts. He climbed on top of Jericho and pounded his fist into Jericho's broken nose. Jericho awoke with a scream and Nikita silenced him with knuckles against teeth.

Nikita raised his fists and bludgeoned Jericho's face again, and again, and again. He ground the sockets to hamburger. His adrenaline took hold, and he lost all inhibition, tears streaming down his cheeks as he pummeled Jericho's face. He wanted to go home. He wanted to read and drink his troubles away, but he wanted Jericho dead more than anything.

Nikita roared and pounded his fists until Jericho was limp and gurgling blood. He didn't hear the door open behind him. He was lost in the high of the adrenaline.

Nikita raised his fists for the killing blow. Jericho was unrecognizable; red foam filled his slack jaw. Nikita's fists felt like they were made of lead. His arms teetered. His knuckles were slashed from Jericho's teeth.

Nikita brought his fists down and a rifle butt slammed into the side of his head, knocking him out cold. He collapsed beside Jericho. A boot crushed his nose, and he awoke with a scream.

Nikita blinked rapidly and saw two men standing over him, their rifles aimed between his eyes.

"Get up," Bishop growled through his bandana.

Nikita was frozen. The African man, Ibex, grabbed Nikita by the collar and dragged him to his feet. As soon as Nikita was standing, Bishop thrust his rifle butt into his nose. Nikita screamed and fell to his knees.

Bishop laid into Nikita without remorse; his boots cracked his ribs, pummeled the air from his lungs, and crushed his face. Nikita cried and put his hands before him, but it was useless. Bishop pulverized him.

Nikita prayed for death. Blood spilled over his jaw as his teeth were kicked in. His tongue hung limp and Bishop kicked his jaw shut, slicing the tip of it off. Nikita stopped struggling. He whimpered in a pool of his own blood.

Ibex dragged Nikita through the doorway into the blinding sunlight. Bishop followed them out.

"Jericho's awake. He's pissed."

"When isn't he?" Ibex chuffed.

"Yeah, but now he has somebody to take it out on," Bishop said. "I feel bad for this poor fucker. Communist, huh? He'll have fun with you."

Nikita was fighting to remain conscious. He was dropped into the thick puddle left from the slain Vietnamese boy's pureed brain-matter. Nikita couldn't register anything; his skull was empty. Bishop grabbed him by the hair and wrenched him back so he was facing the jungle. A rifle barrel prodded his Adam's apple. There was nothing left for him.

Sergei was possessed by the Dragunov.

Taking Pham Chi's life was a shot of methamphetamine to the heart. His body was an empty shell brimming with violent energy. He danced along the edge of the forest, taking aim at the Americans and Vietnamese, pining for another kill shot. The fruit of the Vietnamese boy's bursting skull looped in his mind like Tolstoy's mantra.

Do it for your country; do it for your motherland. Make your family proud. Slay these bastard monsters.

Smoke stung Sergei's peeled eyes. Bullets ripped apart the foliage and sang around his head like mosquitoes. He was so captivated that he never noticed Bishop and Ibex until they stood with Nikita

in his crosshairs.

“We have your friend,” Bishop shouted.

The gunshots ceased. Sergei kept his finger on the trigger. His eyes never stopped moving.

“Come out, and we’ll let you both live,” Bishop shouted. “We only want answers for your crimes. We don’t want any more blood.”

Sergei stared. The energy was sapped from his shivering limbs.

Bishop fired his rifle beside Nikita’s ear. Sergei flinched.

“You have thirty seconds!” Bishop barked.

Sergei remained fixed. If he killed Bishop, Ibex would kill Nikita.

There was nothing he could do but run and bide his time. He couldn’t just leave Nikita to be tortured by those barbarians, though.

Sergei chewed his lip. His body trembled like a junkie coming down from a fix.

Rotor blades thumped overhead and the canopy was stirred in the wind. A helicopter banked low and Bishop gesticulated with his arms, motioning towards the tree-line. The helicopter turned towards Sergei and his gut seized.

Miniguns spun to roaring life and waves of lead scythed through the vegetation along the perimeter. Sergei dove out of the way and a bullet slashed his arm. He barked and lost his footing, bouncing down the hillside as the mini-guns droned overhead. He tumbled until he rolled off of the path and fell into a den hidden beneath the foliage.

The miniguns cut off and gave way to a ringing silence. Sergei could just barely hear footsteps trampling down the hill towards him. Sergei squeezed his shoulder and sank further back into the cold darkness of the tiny den. Ozzie’s boots stepped up to the mouth of the pit. Sergei’s eyes were pale saucers in the dark.

“To the south, Trang! The south!” Ozzie yelled. He stepped out of Sergei’s line of sight and ran further downhill. Sergei let go of a shuddering breath. His mind was reeling. Tolstoy’s mantra was endless in his head.

Blood splashed in the darkness behind Sergei’s clenched eyes. He heard screaming death rattles in the silence. He fingered the bullet wound in his arm to keep himself distracted. His mouth hung open, his exhalations released in shuddering gasps. His eyes were skinned open and bloodshot.

The darkness consumed him.

Jericho scowled at the Father Vulture as it dropped heavily into the clearing. The helicopter leaned heavily onto its right side because of the landing skid that had been crumpled between the jaws of the tyrannosaurus. Smoke slithered from the scars in the metal hull.

Jericho sagged against Bishop's shoulder. His stomach did somersaults. Shadow approached and aimed his shotgun at Nikita's face.

"What do we do with our guest?" Shadow asked.

Jericho peered through his swollen lids. Nikita bowed his head to the blood he was kneeling in.

"Take him to the barracks," Jericho growled. "Find out everything he knows. *Hurt. Him.*"

"Yes, sir," Shadow said. He pulled Nikita to his feet and pressed the shotgun into the base of his spine. He prepared to leave but Jericho halted them. Jericho walked around Nikita and faced him. Nikita trembled.

Jericho spat thick and red onto Nikita's face.

Nikita grimaced and Shadow shoved him towards the barracks. Jericho turned and watched with Bishop as Vulture Squad filed out of the helicopter.

Logan and Xavier, spattered with blood, carried Leon out on a stretcher to the infirmary. Eli stumbled out after them, drinking from his flask while dragging Andrei by his hair. Ryan hopped out of the helicopter last. Jericho stared.

"Everything's gone to shit," Jericho grumbled.

"Welcome to 'Nam, sir," Bishop muttered.

Ryan stood before Jericho. Hellfire swirled in his swampy eyes.

"We have a problem," Ryan said.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE – DIGGING UP DEAD BODIES

Leon was lost in a venomous fever dream, swirling through the scorched darkness that lies between life and death. He saw the Cyclops rip Gerald in half, heard the wet *pop* as his vertebrae were pulled apart. Bones crunched in the darkness while the hands of phantoms ran up and down Leon's skin. Morphine syrettes were plunged into his arms and he was pushed further into the abyss.

He was running through the jungle, racing through an endless maze of foliage. The footsteps of the Father Tyrannosaurus replaced his heartbeat. It was closing in on him; he couldn't see it, but he could feel the behemoth's overwhelming presence.

Leon flew through the jungle as a spirit escaping the specter of death. The edge of the jungle loomed ahead. He dove over the edge and tumbled through darkness, only to fall right into the jaws of the Father Tyrannosaurus. A whimper fluttered through his lips a mile away as he was swallowed whole.

Screams and gunshots flowed around his body like water; claws snapped through his tendons and Viet Cong guerillas plunged their bayonets into his gut. Leon tossed and turned in his bed. He was sinking fast into the embrace of death; he couldn't fight the gravity dragging him down. He felt himself fading away, his soul torn apart by demons, dinosaurs and Viet Cong...

Leon spasmed and awoke with a cry of shock. His eyes were wild and bloodshot. He panted and put a hand to his heart just to be sure it was still beating. Cold sweat drenched his bare torso. Everything was shrouded in his intoxicated fog.

Blinking to clear the haze, Leon saw the pale walls of the infirmary. A morphine drip was stuck into his forearm. With a haggard sigh, he laid back in his bed. He wasn't dead; not yet, at least.

"Are you okay?"

Leon flinched from the unfamiliar voice. A female doctor was watching him from a desk across the room.

"Are you okay?" the doctor, Susan Wilcott, repeated. She stood and crossed the room to his bed. Leon watched her warily as if she were a leopard slinking through the shadows. He was struck by panic and

awe. He licked his chapped lips and swallowed dryly. He couldn't think of words to give this woman.

"I...water," Leon mumbled.

Susan smirked and brought Leon a glass of water. Her eyes never left his. He saw the jasmine waters of an oasis circling her pupils. Leon was hypnotized; he could almost feel himself falling into those calm pools. The thought of warm waters brought goose bumps to his bush-tanned skin.

Susan gave Leon an inquisitive smile and gently extended the glass to him. Leon accepted it with a nod and gulped the water down.

"I thought your name was Leon," Susan said softly.

Leon choked and pulled the glass away, coughing hoarsely. He thumped his chest with the meat of his fist and glanced at Susan.

"Excuse me?"

"You said, 'I, water'. Isn't your name Leon?" she asked. She smiled teasingly, chewing her lower lip. Leon stared at her as if she would pounce and tear his throat open. It took him an awkward pause to catch her joke.

"Oh, sorry," Leon muttered. He cast his eyes to the blanket; pristine white like powdered snow. "My name's Leon."

"So it is," Susan chirped. She bent over the foot of his bed to take his chart, and Leon traced the length of her back with his eyes. She had a slender, yet athletic figure. The white lab coat draped over her back was splotted red with what he assumed was his own blood.

Susan looked over her shoulder and caught Leon's eyes resting on the small of her back. Leon glanced away and blushed despite himself. Susan smiled and extended the clipboard to him, tapping his name on the paperwork.

"See? Leon Varne, 22 years old," she said.

The black lettering was gibberish to Leon. It seemed like ages had passed since he had last read English. He felt like a brutish caveman lost in modern times. He sheepishly looked up from the chart and caught Susan's eyes, those bright, twinkling emeralds.

"Who are you?" Leon asked. His voice was weak, and his heart felt heavy in his chest. He had fallen dangerously close to oblivion, and it was the work of this young lady that had brought him back. He would throw himself at her feet if he could move.

"Dr. Wilcott, but you can call me Susan," she chimed happily. She

tapped her name drawn in cursive at the bottom of the paperwork.

Leon studied the signature as if by doing so, he could decipher the mind of the person who had drawn it so gracefully.

The morphine had slowed the gears in Leon's head to a crawl. He wanted to sleep, but he was scared he would sink back into death if he closed his eyes.

Susan placed the clipboard on his bedside table.

"So how are you feeling, Leon? You looked like you were having a pretty bad nightmare."

Leon took in Susan's flawless, unblemished features. She didn't show any of the signs of Vietnam that he had seen in his friends' faces; the scars etched across their skin, wrinkles from a lifetime's worth of stress, unshaved growth and sun-soaked pigments. Susan looked like she had been created from marble, preserved from the weathering trauma of the outside world in the halls of the Louvre.

Leon wondered what she would look like if she walked into the jungle beyond the perimeter of the base. Would those jeweled eyes become empty like Ryan's? Would she embrace alcohol like Eli or turn manic like Logan? Would she be lost forever in the wilderness like Gerald, nearly lost like he himself had been?

"Leon?" Susan asked. She tilted her head and watched him cautiously. Her voice brought Leon out of his stupor.

"Yeah, I had some bad nightmares," he said, smiling weakly. His voice was flat and dry. "Thanks for your help, Doctor. I really appreciate it."

Susan watched him for a beat, then smiled and turned to the door.

"My pleasure," Susan said, watching him warily. "In the mean time, you have some people that want to talk to you."

Susan held the doorknob and looked over her shoulder at Leon. His eyes were dark and stoic. She couldn't see any thought or emotion in those empty windows. It made her uneasy.

"I'll come back and check on you when they leave, alright?" she said.

"That would be great," Leon said.

Susan gave him an earnest smile and opened the door, revealing the hot light of the morning sun. She watched Leon from the corner of her eye as she stepped into the light.

Leon heard her exchange hushed words with somebody outside. He peered through the blinds of the window beside his bed and

watched as Susan walked away.

Leon savored the swing of her smooth legs, the sashay of her hips. It made something stir inside of him that he hadn't felt in a long time. Too long, he thought.

"Leon, glad to see you're awake, buddy."

Leon turned and saw Ryan leaning in the doorway. Leon wanted to say something, but he couldn't muster any enthusiasm. Instead, he gave a curt nod. "Captain," he said.

There was a glimmer of concern in Ryan's eyes, but he didn't speak. He sat down in a folding chair beside Leon's bed and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. The gauze on Leon's torso was pinpricked with red. Ryan tugged on his mask and cleared his throat.

"How are you feeling, Leon?" Ryan asked. "We almost lost you there."

"You almost lost me a few times, actually," Leon mumbled.

"Yeah, well, welcome to Vulture Squad," Ryan muttered. "I have to say, you must have a new record for most near-death experiences."

Ryan counted off his fingers.

"Nearly got eaten alive once, nearly drowned, nearly got eaten alive *twice*, nearly got disemboweled, nearly got eaten alive *thrice*, nearly fell out of the Father Vulture, nearly died of shock..."

Ryan shook his head.

"Yep, has to be a new record. You should be proud of yourself, Leon. Even Eli hasn't had that many near-death experiences in such a short span of time. You must be lucky."

"Yeah, lucky," Leon said. He bit his lip to stifle a bitter laugh, looking out the window.

"I don't want to be here anymore, Ryan," Leon said. "I'm done. I want to go home."

Ryan watched Leon's cold blue eyes.

"Alright, Leon," Ryan said. "Consider yourself free. I'll file a report that says you got injured in the line of duty, and you'll be discharged with a Purple Heart. Hell, maybe you can get a college scholarship. Wouldn't that be nice? You could finally study whatever you want, free of charge. How does that sound?" Leon's face was locked into an apathetic mask.

Ryan sighed and shook his head. He put a hand on Leon's shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly.

"Look, Leon, I know things aren't the same anymore," Ryan said.

“And believe me, things will never be the same. It isn’t easy, but you have to keep moving and never look back. It’s survival; don’t sit and stew over what you’ve seen or done, don’t pause and reminisce, just hold your head high and move on with your life. Look to your future.

“You’re young, Leon. People like myself, Logan, Xavier...we don’t have a future. This is all we have left. We can’t change it, but *you* can. *You* can go home and see your family and forget that you were ever here. We can’t.”

Leon remained silent. His eyes fell back to his bandages. Ryan exhaled slowly and gave Leon’s shoulder another squeeze before standing from his chair. He crossed the room to the door. Before he stepped out, he glanced over his shoulder.

“You have a chance at a real life, Leon,” Ryan said. “Don’t let it go to waste.”

Leon didn’t look up. Ryan shook his head and shut the door behind him. Leon stared at the stitches tracked along his forearms and across his palms. His hands trembled under the weight of his eyes. He pressed his hands over his face and squeezed, trying to stop the flow of memories, the screams and gunshots that echoed through his mind. He whimpered.

How could he have a future when all he could see was the past?

Ryan squinted in the harsh sunlight and wiped the sweat from his brow. He had seen the look on Leon’s face on other men innumerable times before; the haggard eyes, the listless frown fixed to his lips like a scar. It hurt to see Leon like that; a boy that used to be so young and full of hope, a brilliant new rookie under his wing.

Ryan knew he shouldn’t have recruited him. It was selfish; Leon was anxious to be a hero, and now he was a scarred shell of his former self, another casualty of the war. Ryan felt sick with self-loathing. He would give anything to see the youthful exuberance in Leon’s eyes, but now they were as hard and opaque as stone. Ryan would see those eyes for the rest of his life.

Ryan looked down and saw Logan and Xavier sitting with their backs against the wall of the infirmary. Logan was digging his fingertips into his scalp. His eyes were huge and his mouth quivered in what seemed to be a silent prayer. He rocked on his heels, bumping his head against the wall in a steady rhythm.

Xavier looked equally strung-out. His arm hung limply over

Logan's shoulder as he stared at the splattered blood where Pham Chi's corpse had been. His hair was knotted in muddy clumps. "How's Leon?" Xavier asked, looking up at Ryan. His voice was like sandpaper rubbing together. His eyes twitched across Ryan's face, jittery with endless adrenaline. Ryan cleared his throat and tried to summon some confidence.

"He's alive," Ryan said. "And he's going home. He isn't a Vulture anymore."

Xavier nodded slowly. "Good," he said. He pointed to the open doorway of Jericho's office. "Jericho's waiting for you. He's got Andrei tied up in there. By the sound of it, Bishop's getting ready to interrogate him."

"Where's Eli?" Ryan asked. He glanced around the base. Ozzie and the Vietnamese boys were gathered outside of the barracks where Nikita was being tortured. He saw Ricardo sitting in front of the Father Vulture with his head in his hands; he had orders from Jericho to fly the helicopter south for repair while a platoon of Army Rangers were being flown in for security. It was a little late for security, Ryan thought.

"Last I saw, Eli was behind the barracks," Xavier said. "Throwing up."

Ryan turned.

"Throwing up?"

"Yeah. After Doctor Wilcott patched him up, he went to the barracks to drink," Xavier said. He scratched at the noose of mosquito bites that was looped around his throat. "He must have drank too much 'cause he went around the barracks and started puking."

"For god's sake," Ryan grumbled, shaking his head. "Do you mind checking on him? I'm going to talk to Jericho and see if we can get a ride north to find Miller."

"Sure," Xavier said, climbing to his feet. Logan didn't notice; he continued whispering to himself, knocking his head against the wall. Xavier glanced down at him, but he shook his head and turned back to Ryan.

"I can't get Logan to talk," Xavier said. "It's like he's shut the world out, like he's locked inside of his head. He keeps talking, but I don't know what he's saying. If I check on Eli, can you try talking to him?"

"Yeah, of course," Ryan said.

Xavier put a hand on Ryan's shoulder.

"Good luck," Xavier said, and he walked across the clearing to the barracks. Ryan watched as Xavier left and turned to Logan.

Ryan suddenly felt uncomfortable in his skin; he didn't want to confront the fact of what Logan had done. He didn't want to think of Gerald's death or of the utahraptors that were most likely still hunting them. With a deep breath, he mustered his courage and crouched in front of Logan.

"Logan, can you hear me?" Ryan asked. "It's me, Ryan. Can you hear me? Just nod if you can hear me."

Logan's chin twitched; a subtle hint of a nod. His eyes rotated across Ryan's features. His pupils cut through Ryan's hard exterior and dispensed an icy chill. Ryan felt like he was speaking to a corpse.

"Logan, we need to get Miller," Ryan said. He made each word as solid as concrete. "Remember our previous MO, Project Mamba? Freeing American prisoners from Viet Cong internment camps? We aren't chasing down Russians or fighting dinosaurs, we're just looking for Miller. Understand?"

Logan jerked his head in a nod, but his lips continued to form indecipherable words.

"Can you speak to me?" Ryan asked. "Just tell me something, anything. Let me know you're alright."

Logan was struggling to grasp physical reality, to focus on the human-being crouched before him. He couldn't stop seeing through Ryan, at past events and nightmares; images from Gerald's death, the suffering deinonychus, the phoenix of blood flying from his father's skull like so many Vietnamese men he had slain.

Logan licked his lips and he tried to form coherent words, instead of the desperate inaudible chant he was choking on.

Ryan continued to stare into Logan's eyes. He squeezed Logan's shoulder and Logan recoiled in shock, as if touched by a ghost. His eyes focused on Ryan, and the sudden confirmation of his friend's physical presence made him break into a desperate, choking sob. He dug his fingertips further into his scalp and he gasped, "R-Ryan? Ryan?"

Ryan pulled Logan's hands away.

"I'm here, Logan. Talk to me, just talk."

Logan wailed like an agonized animal, a cry haunting in its depth and resonance. They were the cries of a man lost within his

torment. Ryan pulled Logan into his arms like a child and patted his back; a pitiful attempt at consoling the traumatized young man.

"They won't stop," Logan gasped, "They won't stop blaming me, Ryan, they won't stop."

Ryan's eyes widened when he heard the terror in Logan's voice. He didn't know what Logan was talking about, but it disturbed him profoundly. Logan sounded like he was being possessed. Ryan resisted the urge to pull away. He continued to rock Logan in his arms.

"It's going to be okay, I promise," Ryan said. "Just calm down. Breathe. We'll be out of here in no time."

They both knew it was an empty promise. It didn't matter; Ryan had to keep Logan talking to get him out of his stupor. He needed Logan to be there, rather than wherever he had been hiding in his head.

"I...I killed Gerald," Logan cried. "He's-he's gone, and I fucking killed him, I killed him, Ryan, I killed him--"

"Listen to me, Logan," Ryan said. "You did what needed to be done. Gerald would have thanked you if he could. There was nothing we could have done; he was going to die, and you kept him from suffering."

Logan faced Ryan. His eyes were painfully red and bulging wide.

"I didn't want to, Ryan, I swear," Logan said.

"I know you didn't, Logan," Ryan said. He pulled on his mask. He couldn't look Logan in the eyes. Ryan knew what it was like to kill as an act of mercy; death was an escape from suffering- the suffering of wounds, physical and spiritual, the suffering of life. Ryan recognized Logan's eyes as his own whenever he had the courage to face a mirror.

Ryan saw stars devastating the earth and caught his breath.

"I know you didn't want to kill Gerald," Ryan said. "You helped Gerald when he needed you most, and now Miller needs us. He's lost somewhere in the jungle, and we have to get him back. We have to get him back, and we can't do it without you, Logan. Do you understand? You're a hero. *We* need you. *Miller* needs you."

Logan nodded. The voices blurred in his head, becoming unfocused. Ryan was so physically there, so impossibly real, that he couldn't be ignored.

"I- I understand," Logan said.

"Good," Ryan said. He stood and pulled Logan to his feet.

Logan wiped the tears and snot from his face, smearing the blood that had dried to his face like war paint. He shook his head and took a deep breath. The voices had faded into a listless whisper. Logan fought to push them further into the recesses of his mind.

"When do we leave?" Logan asked.

"As soon as I deal with Jericho," Ryan said.

Andrei suddenly cried out from Jericho's trailer. The sound was punctuated by the thumping of fists against flesh. Ryan winced and turned his back to Logan.

"Get your gear," Ryan said.

Logan nodded and ran to the Father Vulture to reclaim his rifle and ruck sack. Ryan jogged to Jericho's cabin and stepped inside. The first thing he saw was Andrei in a bloody heap on the ground, his wrists bound to the desk. Bishop towered over him, a fist raised to strike. Jericho scowled from his chair at Andrei.

"*Dinosaurs*," Jericho spat. "Fucking dope fiend."

"Please!" Andrei cried. "I'm telling the truth!"

Bishop cracked his knuckles into Andrei's fragile chin and his head bounced off of the desk with a *whang*. Andrei cried out in pain and Bishop threw his fist into Andrei's nose, splashing blood. Andrei's cries were silenced with a boot to his face. Andrei sagged heavily and blood drained from his slack jaw. His eyes climbed up to Ryan.

"Ryan, please," Andrei croaked, "*Help me!*"

"What the hell are you doing?!" Ryan barked, turning on Bishop and Jericho.

Bishop prepared to strike Andrei again, but Ryan shoved him back. Bishop raised his hands in compliance and stepped away. He stared at Ryan from behind his black shades.

"Just doing my job, Baker," Bishop said. "I'd never risk a fight with a Vulture."

"We tried playing nice, but all he's done so far is talk about dinosaurs and black holes," Jericho said. He glared at Ryan through swollen eyes. "I risked the safety of this operation to fetch you from the jungle and this is how you repay me? With some lunatic dope-fiend? *Are you kidding me?*"

"I'm not lying," Andrei cried out. "There are dinosaurs out there, and Borodin let them loose. You have to believe me!"

"Jesus, this again," Jericho grumbled. "Bishop, shut him up."

Bishop walked towards Andrei, but Ryan stepped in the way and raised his fists. Bishop put his hands up and backed away.

“He’s not lying, Jericho,” Ryan said. “We found him in one of the research stations that your Green Beret were looking for. He knows about the Collider, and he’s our only chance of stopping it. Just listen to him.”

Andrei stared at Ryan. Strands of blood were strung from his split lips.

“Tell him about the Collider, Andrei,” Ryan said. “Go ahead, tell him.”

Jericho stared holes through Ryan’s head. He leaned over his desk and glowered at Andrei. “Go ahead, junkie,” he growled. “Tell us about Borodin and the Collider.”

Andrei bowed his head and sucked in a deep breath.

“General Grigory Borodin,” Andrei said. “General Grigory Borodin, one of the top Generals in the Russian Army. He was tasked with overseeing research for a particle collider, a device that fires particles at nearly the speed of light. I was hired on as his chief scientist...”

“I know the name,” Jericho said. “The CIA’s been monitoring him for a long time now. The ‘Mad Bear’, they call him.”

“I did everything for him,” Andrei said, ignoring Jericho. “I designed the blueprints for the Collider, oversaw the production, everything. Your intelligence agents, your moles, were spying on us in Moscow. He had to move production to this valley to keep it away from your prying eyes.”

Jericho nodded.

“What was the collider used for?”

“Antimatter,” Andrei coughed. “You can create antimatter with a particle collider. Borodin said that they were going to manufacture antimatter for endless energy, but that was a lie. He was going to use it as a catalyst for nuclear weapons.

“Antimatter can be split like an atom, but without the radioactive fallout. He wanted to create nuclear bombs that wouldn’t leave any radiation. He wanted to use these ‘clean’ bombs to one-up the United States. He could use these bombs to clear every inch of your continent and end this cold war. Russia would be the sole super power. That’s what Borodin is trying to do right now, this very minute, with a second collider. He wants to create a Soviet World Order.”

“‘Soviet World Order’, that sounds so stupid,” Bishop said.

“Shut up, Bishop,” Jericho grunted.

Jericho leaned back in his chair. His scowl tightened into a grimace and he locked eyes with Ryan.

Ryan nodded slowly, cementing Andrei's statement.

Jericho cleared his throat and turned to Andrei.

"So what does this have to do with black holes?" Jericho asked.

Andrei's breathing became labored. He coughed into his shoulder.

"There was a problem with the Collider," Andrei said. "Borodin was always cutting corners. He had us use the worst possible combination: a tau particle, the densest particle known to man, and a polonium particle, the most radioactive element on the periodic table."

"Just like the shipments we found," Bishop said, stroking the bandana on his mouth thoughtfully like a beard. "The Viet Cong shipments we were tracking. They had barrels of radioactive waste. Our intelligence said that it was Polonium-T, a new compound."

"Exactly," Andrei said. "My theory is that when we test fired the Collider, the particle beams didn't collide. They must have missed, and the polonium particle was caught in the tau particle's inertia. That made the polonium particle sling-shot faster than the speed of light."

"Isn't that impossible?" Bishop asked. "I thought that was the universal speed limit. You can't break it."

"It is, and it *did*," Andrei said gravely. "When something breaks the speed of light, it rips through the fabric of space-time. Two things can happen when you punch a hole through space-time; you either create a black hole or a worm hole."

Bishop dropped into a chair.

"That's insane; it's impossible," he said, shaking his head.

"It isn't impossible, or else it wouldn't have happened!" Andrei snapped. "When we tested the collider, it was destroyed. We hit the switch and there was a flash of light, a scream of lightning, and the collider was blown to pieces. All that was left was a pool of Polonium-T where the rings had been."

"The Polonium-T was the gateway to a wormhole; a portal through time and space," Andrei said. He laughed, shaking his head. "If it weren't such a nightmare, I'd have been proud of myself."

"A portal?" Jericho scoffed. "What a load of horseshit. Next, he's going to say that a bunch of dinosaurs crawled out of that primordial ooze, right? Utter horseshit."

Ryan and Andrei made brief eye contact, but neither spoke.

“What about a black hole?” Bishop asked. “What happens if Borodin fucks up again, and he makes one of those?”

Andrei licked his lips and pulled himself to a sitting position.

“It would kill us all,” Andrei said. “A black hole is like a worm hole, except we don’t know what the destination is. The only black holes witnessed in our universe are from collapsed stars, and they have such an immense mass that they appear to distort the space around them.

“If Borodin created a black hole on earth, it would swallow us all up, then the planet, and eventually our solar system, as well. The black hole’s gravitational force would stretch us to the point of obliteration, and we would all be destroyed. Very painfully, I might add, which is why you need to stop wasting your time assaulting me and go stop Borodin before it’s too late.”

A potent silence filled the room. Andrei wheezed from the floor. Jericho’s eyes darted from Ryan to Andrei and back again.

“Get your squad ready, Baker.” Jericho said. “You’re going to that Collider.”

“No,” Ryan said.

Jericho stared.

“What did you just say to me?”

“No, Jericho, I’m not,” Ryan said. “You *used* us. You didn’t give a fuck about the missing Green Beret; you just wanted my squad to play canary in the coal mine and see what was going on at those research stations.

“Get your black ops team to take care of it, or send a strike force, or just bomb the entire fucking compound into dust, but you’re not going to use my men and I as pawns anymore. One of our friends is out there, and he needs us. I’m going after him. Have somebody else do your dirty work, because I’m done.”

“I’m *ordering* you, you little shithead!” Jericho roared. “You’re going to that fucking compound, or I’ll have you arrested for treason!”

“Fuck you!” Ryan snapped.

Bishop and Andrei froze. Ryan and Jericho stood poised to fight. Ryan clenched his fists.

“You don’t give a shit about any of us!” Ryan shouted. “You didn’t give a shit about my last squad, you didn’t give a shit about McNeil, and you don’t give a shit about the hundreds of men you’ve sent to death scrounging around for your clandestine *bullshit*! You don’t care how many bodies it takes to get what you want. I care about

Miller; I'm not going to let him die just because you don't care." Jericho shook with rage. His face was red-hot. He stared at Ryan until he realized that the young captain wouldn't back down. Jericho exhaled and fell back into his chair.

"Okay, Ryan. Fine," Jericho said. "You want to save your friend. I want Borodin stopped. The helicopter is being flown south, so for now our only means of transportation is the patrol boat down by the river. Bishop and his team will escort your squad wherever you need to go. Once you get there, you'll have twelve hours to find your friend. When your time is up, you'll go with Bishop's team to the Russian compound and destroy that collider. Are we clear?"

Ryan narrowed his eyes.

"You're serious?"

"As serious as a black hole," Jericho muttered. "Get your friend and get this Collider decommissioned, and you'll never hear from me again. No more clandestine operations. You'll go back to saving American soldiers from internment camps. Fair?"

"What about Andrei?" Ryan asked. "What happens to him?"

Jericho spat on the floor.

"He's ours, now. We'll drill him for all the information we can get." Ryan stared at Andrei's beaten face. He followed the track marks on Andrei's arms, the feverous sweat soaking through his tattered rags. Ryan scratched at the imaginary spiders dancing across his forearm. If Andrei was lucky enough to live through the morphine withdrawal, he would spend the rest of his life in the hands of horrific CIA interrogators. He couldn't let that happen.

"What if he helps us?" Ryan asked. "He knows the valley and its dangers like the back of his hand. He can help lead us to Borodin's base and decommission the Collider safely. He's an invaluable asset; we need him."

"Fine," Jericho grunted. "Just get him out of my sight. I want your squad ready in thirty minutes. Bishop, Ozzie, Shadow, and Ibex will take your squad upriver. You know your orders. I don't want any more fuck-ups. You wouldn't want to make McNeil--"

"Affirmative," Ryan said, glaring at Jericho.

Jericho waved his hand, and Bishop cut the ropes from Andrei's wrists. Ryan helped him to his feet. Andrei shivered and leaned against him. Ryan, Bishop, and Andrei walked to the door, but Jericho cleared his throat, stopping them in their tracks.

"What about the dinosaurs?" Jericho asked.

Ryan looked at Andrei. He didn't speak.
"Just metaphors, sir," Ryan said. "Only metaphors."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX – HADES

Recollections of the fall emerged as Miller regained consciousness. He remembered crashing through the canopy, tree limbs pummeling his flailing body as he plummeted to the undergrowth. When he struck the forest floor, he had lost consciousness for a brief few minutes, and then awoke in the darkness of the jungle. Miraculously, he had survived without breaking any limbs. Miller's chest throbbed in the present moment; he must have cracked some of his ribs. He had a memory of crawling across the dark forest floor to where his knife had landed. Once his hand had landed on top of the blade, a rifle appeared beside his temple. He had found himself surrounded by a half dozen Viet Cong guerillas. Their leader, a wiry man with the red eyes of a devil, knocked him back into unconsciousness.

Bitter smoke filled Miller's nostrils. His eyes fluttered open and he saw the forest floor sliding beneath him. He was being dragged by his arms through the mud by a pair of guerrillas. Miller tried to raise his head to look at his captors, but he was painfully shocked by a pinched nerve in his neck. A broken tooth tumbled through his mouth. He spat out the tooth and sour blood poured thickly over his lips, dribbling down his chin.

Miller raised his head carefully, trying not to aggravate his pinched nerve, and he saw a dark tunnel of foliage stretching before him towards the pulsing red light of smoldering embers. The silhouette of a man was painted across the shimmering crimson. A trio of feral dogs snarled and tugged against their chains beside the apparition. Miller knew hell as well as his home. The Battle of Hue City had been hell incarnate. A metropolis ablaze; buildings crumbling to dust and men screaming for mercy from the eternal fire and swarms of bullets that filled the streets. Blizzards of ash had scorched their skin and the pavement had split open to swallow men whole. Whenever Miller and the other Marines had sought solace inside of the charred remains of office buildings, they would find burned piles of massacred civilians, grotesque mounds of charred flesh with red-hot bones protruding like thorns. They were seamless monstrosities; it was impossible to tell where one body ended and another began. Miller often saw those immolated masses during

sleepless nights.

Miller didn't believe in the devil; he believed in the evil of man. He saw the devil in their actions. He had seen the devil in Hue city and in the internment camps that he had liberated with Vulture Squad. He had seen the devil in himself while looking for Viet Cong in the villages along the Han River with Eli. Miller tried to purge the devil from his actions with prayer, but he could never purge his memories. Nothing could erase the past.

Miller was dropped at the feet of the man standing before the fire. Smoke wafted in sheets around the figure. A procession of Viet Cong guerillas watched from behind the haze. The dogs snapped and snarled inches from Miller's face, but he wasn't afraid. The familiar animals were almost comforting to see compared to the deinonychus and utahraptors. Miller growled back at the dogs and climbed to a kneeling position.

The silhouette standing before Miller was silent. The cherry of a joint flashed to life between the man's lips.

"Give him water," the stranger drawled.

Frigid water crashed over Miller's bare torso and he collapsed into violent spasms. The cold seeped through his flesh and chilled his bones. He struggled to control his shivering. He didn't want to show any weakness to these savage monsters.

The man laughed. The flowery aroma of opium drifted from his parted lips. Miller wanted to take the joint from the man's lips and ground his face into the embers like a cigarette butt, but his wrists were bound behind his back.

The man placed his boot on the back of Miller's neck and shoved him face-down in the mud. Miller gasped and choked; his pinched nerve felt like it was being electrocuted. The Viet Cong were silent. "My name is Con Nhen," the man said, his voice dragging like sludge.

Con Nhen lifted his foot and Miller rolled over, sucking air. Miller's eyes fell to Con Nhen's feet and he saw that Con Nhen was wearing a Green Beret's boots; the shoes of a dead man. Hatred burned in the pit of Miller's stomach. It fueled him. He dug his shoulders into the ground and he pushed himself back into a sitting position.

Con Nhen smirked and leaned into Miller's face. Scars were scrawled across his sunken cheeks and bony jaw. His eyes glowed like hot charcoals in their darkened sockets.

Miller hocked bloody spit into Con Nhen's face.

Con Nhen leaned back and shook his head.

“Bad GI,” Con Nhen laughed. “Very bad GI.”

A rifle butt cracked into the base of Miller’s neck and he hit the ground with a pained yelp. The dogs went wild with savage fury. Their chains rattled and snapped taut. Con Nhen sat on his haunches in front of Miller.

“What brings you to my valley, GI?” Con Nhen asked. “Rape? Murder? Have you come to steal my children and slaughter my wife? Were you hoping to raze our farmlands? Destroy our homes? You can’t be here for anything good.”

Miller ground his teeth.

“You speak English well for a Charlie. Who taught you? The Russians?”

Con Nhen laughed.

“You must be cold, GI. Have you ever tasted fire?”

Miller thought of the palpability of smoke and fire in the air of Hue.

“I have,” Miller grunted.

“Funny,” Con Nhen said.

Co Nhen’s hand struck Miller’s chin as fast as a viper and forced his mouth open. Miller felt Con Nhen’s grimy fingers slide beneath his tongue. He gagged.

Con Nhen took a pair of pliers from his belt and snatched a coal from the fire. The dogs were barking in a frenzy. Con Nhen held the coal before Miller’s open mouth and shook it. Sparks stung Miller’s gums. The heat from the coal was intense; it singed the stubble on his face.

“Why are you here, GI?” Con Nhen asked.

The chords in Miller’s neck bulged with strained effort. He snapped his jaws shut over Con Nhen’s fingers and his teeth clacked against bone. Con Nhen yowled and jerked his hand away; strips of flesh were peeled off into Miller’s mouth. Miller retched and spat out the bloody ribbons of skin.

Miller was struck in the face with the pliers and he hit the ground screaming. The coal scorched his flesh; his skin sizzled and popped. He shrieked in agony and his arms tugged uselessly against their binds. Con Nhen kicked the air from his lungs. The dogs howled with Miller.

Miller spat boiling blood. His cheek blistered into a bright white welt.

“Bad GI, very bad GI,” Con Nhen hissed. He silenced the dogs with

a wave of his hand.

Miller gasped heavily. The heat of the burn sucked the air from his lungs.

Con Nhen grabbed Miller by the throat and dragged him to the smoldering pit. The intensity of the heat doubled with each step closer. Miller thrashed and kicked, but the other guerillas surrounded him and kicked him down.

Con Nhen held Miller's head over the embers. His facial hair was scorched off. The heat dug into his blistered cheek like the nails of wraiths. Con Nhen was silent and patient, methodical as a serpent. "You have one last chance for penance," Con Nhen said. "Why are you here? Tell me your sins, demon."

Miller didn't speak as he stared into the pulsating light of the embers. The coals hissed and spat. Con Nhen shook Miller out of his stupor and lowered him closer. The heat became unbearable. He could feel the water of his eyes begin to boil.

"We found the bodies of your Green Beret, demon," Con Nhen said. "We've been watching your friends. We know there are others. If you don't tell me why you are here, I'm going to drop you."

Miller imagined falling through those embers into eternal darkness and fire. He felt Con Nhen's claws digging into the veins of his throat.

"I'm here because you shot our helicopter, asshole," Miller choked. Con Nhen threw Miller backwards into the mud.

Miller coughed and thanked god he hadn't fallen. Con Nhen stood over him, sucking a lungful of opium. His shoulders relaxed. He barked a string of Vietnamese, and a pair of guerillas came around the fire. They dragged another man by his bound arms. A sack was tied over the man's head, but Miller immediately knew it was Nguyen, the boy from the helicopter.

Nguyen begged frantically in his native tongue. Con Nhen watched Miller with cold, dark eyes.

"Do you know this whelp, demon?" Con Nhen asked.

"Help me, please!" Nguyen howled.

Miller rolled onto his stomach and stared up at Con Nhen. He prayed his face didn't give away his panic.

"No, I don't," Miller said.

"If you don't know him, then he isn't worth keeping alive," Con Nhen said, "You demons have let my fellow countrymen die. You've murdered our families and led our brothers against us. It won't

make a difference if I end his life, will it?"

Con Nhen ripped the sack away from Nguyen's head and pulled a knife from his belt. Miller immediately recognized his rosary wrapped around the hilt; a gift from his Nana after his first Communion. Rage blinded Miller's pain.

Con Nhen pressed the blade against Nguyen's throat and dragged it across his skin. Blood seeped from the gentle wound. Nguyen panicked and cried fearfully. Con Nhen pulled the knife away and slammed the hilt against Nguyen's temple, knocking him unconscious. He poised to slash Nguyen's throat open.

Miller's eyes jumped from the blade to Nguyen's young face. Miller saw the embers staring through him like the eyes of judgment.

"He's just a kid, you bastard!" Miller barked. "I'll talk, just leave him alone!"

A rotten smile spread across Con Nhen's face. His teeth were glistening fangs.

"As you wish," Con Nhen hissed.

A pair of guerillas grabbed Miller by his arms and dragged him towards a dark, dilapidated thatch hut across the camp. Another pair of Viet Cong dragged Nguyen back into the shadows. The dogs howled and barked.

Con Nhen walked beside Miller, pressing a coal against the ka-bar until the blade glowed red-hot. Panic swam through Miller's body. He couldn't take his eyes off of the crucifix hanging from the fiery blade. Con Nhen cackled hideously.

Miller knew hell.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN – THE RIVER STYX

The Americans' patrol boat scythed through glittering green waves, skipping across the water like a stone. The lush tropical banks blurred around the boat until they became the dark walls of a tunnel. Ibex pushed the throttle, and the patrol boat lurched, a spire of water spraying from the propellers. Bishop and Ozzie laughed; Andrei clutched desperately at his seat. The roar of the engines drowned the sounds of the jungle and the wind that howled in their ears.

Eli was indifferent to the adrenaline rush. He leaned against the boat's railing and dangled his copper flask over the spitting wash. Vietnam's endless rivers had come to define his life in the war. Years ago, after Eli's near death experience in Hue City, his and

Miller's platoon had been sent into Vietnam's darkest heart to search for Viet Cong in the villages where no other soldiers dared to set foot. They had spent nearly a year riding from village to village on different patrol boats, always dreading their next destination. Eli never knew if the next stop would be his last. He carried his fear on those eternal boat rides, always dreaming of the boat that would finally carry him home.

That ride was always promised but never delivered. Their officers kept demanding higher kill counts. The more Viet Cong they killed, the greater the promise of escape. Eli had fantasized of escape while on those rivers. Alcohol was the next best thing.

Eli took a biting gulp from the flask. The familiar pain was comforting; it was better than the pain of silence. Without Miller, Eli was condemned to his thoughts. He hated his memories. He hated who he had become, the things he had done in those villages along the river.

Simply probing those memories made Eli push the flask against his lips and suck like it was a mother's teat. His addiction was the greatest love he had ever known; it was in his blood. He was a red-blooded Kentuckian, raised by generations of alcoholics. His scorched throat was a reminder of home, a distraction from the eyes of a dead child that stared from within.

Eli wanted to stay sober for Miller's sake, but this river was leading him towards a terrifying destination. He didn't want to think of where they would arrive or how they would find Miller. He was afraid of the memories that rose in the silence of Miller's absence, the screams in the darkness of his mind.

Eli was content to ride the river forever if it meant never arriving, that the journey wouldn't end. He wanted ignorance. He wanted to forget.

He'd give anything to drift away.

Ryan watched Eli from the corner of his eye. He had been meaning to confront Eli on his drinking habit, but there wasn't enough time. If Eli proved to be more trouble than he was worth, Ryan would leave him with Bishop's team. He already had one addict to worry about; Andrei was currently in the throes of morphine withdrawal. The young scientist was sickly pale and shone with profuse sweat. He was curled in the fetal position at the back of the boat, fighting nausea.

Ryan understood the feeling; he had spent innumerable nights suffering the same as Andrei years ago, during his first trials as the captain of Vulture Squad.

Ryan staggered across the bucking boat and dropped into the seat beside Andrei. Gauze and stitches covered Andrei's battered face. Andrei watched Ryan with glazed, sunken eyes. His teeth ground through his lower lip.

"What-what do you want?" Andrei groaned. His fingernails stripped skin from the infected sore on his forearm. Ryan grimaced behind his mask.

"I want to know more," Ryan said. "I saved you from a life in the stockades; I think I deserve some answers about where the dinosaurs came from."

"Yeah, *saved* me," Andrei scoffed. He wretched and dry-heaved. His ribs constricted his lungs dry. Ryan winced at the contractions as Andrei collapsed in a fit of hacking coughs. Spit flew from his blackened gums.

"If you want to save me, get me a fix, *fast*," Andrei wheezed. "*Please*."

"Not a chance, Andrei," Ryan said. "Now tell me about the dinosaurs."

"Well, it was worth a shot," Andrei sighed. He pulled his knees into his chest. "When we test fired the collider, we created a wormhole that the dinosaurs came out of. Tyrannosaurs, triceratops, utahraptors, anything and everything just emerged from the wormhole. The dinosaurs nearly destroyed the compound trying to get away."

Andrei clutched at his sides and groaned. Ryan offered him his canteen, but he shook his head. He inhaled sharply through his teeth, hissing, and he continued.

"After the dinosaurs escaped, Borodin had the compound rebuilt and development on a second collider commenced. I was against it, so he had me sent to a research station to study the dinosaurs and how they fit into the local ecosystem. It was fascinating work, but it was only to placate me. He wanted me out of the picture."

"You told me about how he had everybody on the project killed," Ryan said. "Right?"

"That's right," Andrei coughed. "Except me. I fled."

"And what about the dinosaurs?" Ryan asked. "What have you learned from studying them for so long?"

Andrei shook his head in dismay. "I learned that we're doomed," he said.

"Why's that?" Ryan asked. "Because of the collider?"

"That, but also because of the dinosaurs," Andrei said. "You might not understand, but the dinosaurs are an invasive species. They fit so perfectly into this environment that they're eliminating all other competition. Have you seen any tigers? Crocodiles? Bears?"

Ryan paused.

"No," he said. "I haven't seen any predators other than dinosaurs since I've been here."

"That's because there aren't any left," Andrei said. "They've all been outcompeted. It's survival of the fittest. The dinosaurs are the most sophisticated animals of all time; they had hundreds of millions of years to evolve and adapt. Our ecosystems are a blink of that time. Our animal kingdom is no match."

"So how does that doom *us*?" Ryan asked.

"Think about it," Andrei said. "The dinosaurs thrive in this ecosystem, so they spread like a virus. The spread cannot be contained by man or Mother Nature. The dinosaurs are spreading out of this valley, and they'll keep migrating further and further. I can guarantee you that dinosaurs will be in Cambodia and Laos in a matter of months, if they haven't gotten there already. After that, Thailand and Burma, then China and India."

Ryan shook his head.

"There's no way that they could do that undetected. People will find out. Militaries will mobilize to stop them. Nobody wants a T. rex in their country."

Andrei grasped his stomach and retched, spitting onto the seat. Ryan focused on listening to the water rushing beneath the boat while he waited for Andrei to finish dry-heaving. Once Andrei caught his breath, he spoke slowly.

"You would have to raze every forest in the world to prevent the spread of the dinosaur populations, but we know that won't work. Your Agent Orange chemicals, DDT and herbicides and napalm, none of it will ever be enough to eliminate all life. Not even the combined forces of the nations' armies could prevent a species from spreading. It won't stop."

"How do you know that?" Ryan asked. "If we can prove the existence of dinosaurs to Jericho, that'll be the end of it. This valley will be quarantined and everything in it will be nuked to shit. Any

dinosaurs seen outside of the quarantine will be killed. Easy as that. We've hunted species to extinction before, right? We can do it again if we want."

"You can't control the tide of life," Andrei groaned. "You'd be delusional to think otherwise. Man might play god by splitting atoms and reshaping the world through acts of war, but we cannot permanently change the world to fit our desires. Nature cannot be controlled. Our mistakes will outlive us. The fallout will spread, and there will be no altering our errors. Nature will balance itself out with the introduction of the dinosaurs, but there's nothing we can do. Nothing."

Andrei shook his head.

"And it's all my fault."

"You couldn't have known," Ryan said.

"Ignorance isn't an escape from the truth," Andrei said. "Nobody knows the gravity of their actions until it's too late; we have hindsight when we need foresight. Hiroshima, Nagasaki, *Vietnam*. Another irreversible mistake in the soon to be shortened saga of humanity's existence, and it's all my fault. It's on my shoulders."

"Andrei, I know you feel guilty--"

Ryan paused. "Actually, you *are* guilty, but there's no reason we can't fix this before it's too late. Just don't let your guilt drag you down. Otherwise, you won't see any solutions."

"There's more to this problem than you could ever comprehend, Ryan," Andrei growled, rubbing his brow. "You don't know much about dinosaurs, but I do. I've noticed something about the species that came from the wormhole; they're all from different parts of the world, from different time periods. Some of these animals were oceans apart, and others were separated by millennia."

"What does that matter?" Ryan asked.

"It's as if you had a time machine, and you walked through to find Ancient Egyptians and Napoleon with Woolly Mammoths. It doesn't make any sense."

"How is that possible?" Ryan asked. "Wouldn't they all come through the portal through the same entrance on the other side?"

Andrei sighed, and his head dropped.

"I can't explain it," he said. "That's what scares me more than anything else. I have no possible explanation for how different animals from different epochs and environments somehow came through one wormhole simultaneously. There's so much that we can

never understand about the other side of that wormhole, because we can never go through it again. It's gone.

"My only theory is that possibly the wormhole created multiple openings in different periods of space-time, but there's no way to be sure. We're just now on the cusp of a new scientific era. There's so much about this realm of physics that's yet to be understood."

Ryan rubbed his jaw.

"Is that as bad as a black hole?" he asked.

"No," Andrei said. "As far as I understand. But it could be a forewarning to even worse things to come. For all we know, we've begun to unravel the seams of this dimension. The collider may have altered our reality in ways we're just now beginning to see. Only time will tell."

"What do you think will happen?" Ryan asked.

"That's anybody's guess," Andrei said. "My greatest fear, however, is that some of these wormholes may begin to appear autonomously. Pray that doesn't happen."

Ryan sighed.

"I don't understand any of this stuff. I'm sure Leon would have been able to make more sense of it than I could. Let's just hope you're wrong about your theories."

"That's the problem," Andrei muttered coldly. "I'm *never* wrong."

"At least we can stop this second collider before it makes things worse," Ryan said.

Andrei scoffed.

"You think stopping this second collider is going to change anything in the long run? Why do you think Jericho is in this valley? Do you think he legitimately wants to stop a threat, or do you think he wants to get something out of this?"

"You mean take advantage of the situation?" Ryan asked. "I wouldn't put it past him."

"It's a chess game, Ryan," Andrei said. "No matter what technology one nation makes, the other will attempt to steal and reverse-engineer it; it's an arms race. Regardless of what happens, that collider has to be destroyed."

Andrei lowered his voice to a whisper, leaning closer to Ryan.

"Jericho can't get his hands on the collider. I know for a fact that when this ordeal is over, he'll just try to build another one. It's arrogance. Russia failed with their collider, but the United States will be there to steal the pieces and plans and make their own, a

better one, a more dangerous one. It's in their nature."

Ryan nodded, looking warily at the members of the Black Ops team. "We'll destroy that collider," Ryan said. "We won't let them get their hands on it. We're not going to be run through this gauntlet just to have Jericho recreate the problem that started it all."

Andrei coughed into his shoulder. He extended his hand to Ryan. "Promise me," Andrei said. "Promise me, you won't let them get their hands on the collider. We can't trust anybody affiliated with these corrupt leaders. It has to be the men on the ground that keep us safe, not the wolves in sheep's clothing."

Ryan gripped Andrei's frail hand.

"You have my word," he said.

There was a sudden uproar of shouting at the bow of the ship.

"Ryan," Bishop cried out. "Ryan, we have a problem!"

Ryan jumped to his feet. The boat slammed to a stop on its belly and Ryan stumbled.

"What the hell is that thing?!" Ibex screamed.

Ryan began to sweat. The other men on the boat leaned against the railing and aimed their rifles towards the opposing river banks.

Andrei cowered in his seat.

Ryan held his rifle high and shouldered past Ibex and Bishop, who were both frozen at the steering column. A rumbling groan shook the boat. Ryan caught his breath when he reached the bow and saw the stretch of river beyond. His jaw slowly fell open.

"*Shit*," he gasped.

A herd of sapphire-skinned triceratops waded through the river in front of the boat. Each of the lumbering dinosaurs were as large as a supply truck. The placid herbivores had horns like sharpened ebony, with frilled crests of bone that were splashed with stripes of vivid scarlet and inky black. Needle-tipped quills sprouted from their hips and ran down the length of their thick tails.

The herd of triceratops were grazing on the elephant grass and palm fronds that grew beneath the shade of the canopy. They used their parrot-like beaks to excavate entire mounds of vegetation, chewing slowly with their mouths hanging open.

Smaller dinosaurs, stygimolochs and bird-like hypsiphilodonts, darted between the legs of the docile herbivores along the river bank. Birds rode on the backs of the triceratops, pecking at parasites. Monkeys climbed over their horns, hooting and shrieking gleefully at each other.

Ryan stared, simultaneously amazed and horrified.

Bishop and the black ops team stood with their rifles shaking in their hands. They fixed their sights on the huge heads of the triceratops watching the boat. The triceratops huffed mist and shook water from their glistening black horns. The gently undulating current pulled the patrol boat through the herd. The lumbering herbivores were close enough to spear the men inside. The Americans were gripped by a silent tension that was occupied by the rich songs of hornbill birds and whooping cranes. "Herbivores, right?" Ryan whispered to Andrei.

"Yes," Andrei said. He adjusted the fractured glasses on the end of his nose and slowly rose to his feet. "We should be safe as long as we don't do anything to antagonize them. If we don't get near the infants or the bull, we'll be okay."

"The bull?" Ryan asked.

Andrei pointed to the shade of a banyan tree, where a tremendous alpha male triceratops was watching the boat's passage. It was the largest triceratops in the herd, and it wore several decades-worth of scars across its brilliant red crest. The bull's horns were snapped and sharpened like an elephant's tusks.

Ryan could hear the air rushing through the leviathan's chest from nearly a hundred meters away. The bull followed the boat with dull, muddy eyes. Ryan swallowed dryly.

"A single triceratops weighs as much as five elephants, so I wouldn't give them a reason to charge," Andrei muttered.

Ryan nodded diligently, still staring at the Bull triceratops.

"You heard him, everybody; don't shoot," Ryan said. "Ibex, keep the boat dead-center. Don't get in between the baby trikes and their mothers. Just stay calm and get us through here nice and slow."

Ibex gawked. He looked at Bishop.

"Don't look at me," Bishop said. "I didn't know about any of this shit!"

"What the fuck is going on?" Ozzie asked. "Where did these things come from?"

"Andrei can explain where the dinosaurs came from when we aren't surrounded by them," Ryan said. "Just stay calm and don't make a scene. You hear that, everybody? Keep your fingers off your triggers."

There was a tense silence. The triceratops herd groaned in placid baritones. Everybody's rifles were angled over the railing at the

peaceful animals. The boat was surrounded by walls of glistening sapphire scales and scutes. A triceratops waded beside the boat and encompassed their entire flank. The quills on its back dripped water droplets with each thumping footstep. The boat bounced in sync. Eli drank from his flask. Logan chewed on his tongue; the voices swelled in his skull. Xavier's eyes were peeled and painfully bloodshot. Ryan watched his terrified squad mates from the corner of his eye.

Andrei gazed at the herd in wonder, and his shivering ceased. The river curved and the banks tightened around the boat. The triceratops bumped shoulders with the boat's hull. Xavier shuddered with each scrape of scales against metal. The canopy stretched over their heads, and tiny four-winged dinosaurs, microraptors, hopped across the low-hanging branches. A stygimoloch howled and clacked heads with a rival male on the shore. The sound was a gunshot in Xavier's ears. Panic boiled in his gut.

The situation was becoming too much for Xavier. The shock of seeing utahraptors had sent Xavier into a fit of paranoia the likes of which he had never known. His greatest fear of being hunted by an alpha predator had been realized, and the adrenaline was stretching his nerves to the breaking point. The natural ambiance of the jungle that had once brought him peace was suddenly overpowering. Every foreign chirp, grunt, and growl accelerated his heartbeat. The anxiety filled Xavier's head like smoke and blinded his thoughts. He felt like an animal deprived of reason, lost in the perpetual need of fight or flight. Primal instincts gripped him tighter than he could hold the rifle in his hands. He couldn't just wait to die; he had to act.

Xavier swung his rifle around the boat at each of the triceratops surrounding them. Ozzie and Shadow ducked away; Eli put his hands up and said, "Woah, chill!"

Xavier tasted bile. His pulse pounded in his ears. He heard a branch snap, and he spun on his heel. Bishop dove away from Xavier's rifle. "Xavier, lower your weapon!" Ryan growled.

Xavier panted like a rabid dog. Shadow moved to take Xavier's rifle, so Xavier aimed the M16 at his chest. Shadow pointed his Remington shotgun at Xavier and took a step closer.

Xavier backed against the railing of the boat and a triceratops horn grazed his back. Xavier screeched and swung his rifle towards the animal's face.

Ryan quickly leapt forward and wrestled the M16 from Xavier's hands. Xavier howled and clawed for the rifle.

"Stop, can't you hear it?!" Xavier cried, "It's out there! I can hear it! Please!"

Eli and Bishop tried to pull them apart. Xavier elbowed Eli in the ribs and dove for the rifle in Ryan's hands. Ryan rolled away and Xavier struck the railing.

The triceratops surrounding the boat groaned in distress. Everybody was shouting in the mad grab for the rifle until a cavernous hiss drifted through the air. The animals around the boat went silent. The men in the boat stopped fighting, frozen in place.

The sound of dozens of thumping footfalls approached from the jungle beyond the river bank. The smaller animals in the underbrush went squawking and squealing for cover. The dinosaurs around the boat started to panic and bellow in alarm. The river rolled in the rising chaos. Xavier stared at Ryan with pleading eyes. "I told you," he whispered breathlessly, "*I heard it.*"

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT – PENANCE

When Miller awoke, he was lying on his stomach in the mud with his hands tied behind his back. The Viet Cong had dragged him into the cold, dank interrogation hut hours ago. He had lost track of time in the darkness and passed out. Miller tried to blink, but realized he had been blind-folded. Growling with effort, he twisted his head from side to side, sliding off the bandana that had been tied around his eyes.

Miller could hear the Viet Cong speaking in their alien tongue, but it was so dark in the room that he couldn't tell if he was alone or not. He imagined they were devising horrific methods of information extraction.

Miller had seen countless atrocities in the internment camps he had liberated with Vulture Squad; men with bamboo growing through their joints, eyelids peeled off for the festering flies and mosquitoes. Some of the prisoners they had found were so disfigured and maimed that they were only recognizable as living humans by their agonized screams. Miller imagined his skin would be flayed, and he would be trussed like a pig in some tree as a warning for his friends. A whimper rose in Miller's throat. The welt on his cheek flared with acidic pain. He snapped his ropes taut until his wrists felt like they would break. Miller tried to stand, but his bare feet slipped through

the mud. His skin was numb from the cold. He blinked his eyes until fuzzy details began to emerge.

Miller saw he was alone in the hut; the room was empty, save for a few metal tools lying on the ground beside a stool. He developed a quick plan; if he could find a sharp tool, he could saw through his knots and wait for Con Nhen to enter the room. If Con Nhen went to touch him, Miller would kill the bastard and escape.

Miller squirmed through the mud and grasped for a tool behind his back. He felt dizzy and his fingers trembled. Ribbons of sunlight fell through the gaps in the thatch walls, and Miller saw teeth strewn across the mud like shards of porcelain. Miller moaned and clawed desperately through the mud for anything he could find.

His fingers tapped against something cold and heavy; he traced the rusted cutting edge of pliers. Miller grasped the pliers and started sawing at the knots around his wrist. His eyes never left the door of the hut as he worked. The voices of the Viet Cong dissipated like mist.

Miller heard the hiss of fire in the shadows. The glowing tip of a joint drifted through the shade. Fangs glistened and crimson eyes flashed open. Miller backed himself against the wall and sawed frantically at his ropes. He saw Con Nhen materialize from the darkness. Miller grit his teeth and tugged at the ropes; a cry burst through his lips.

Con Nhen picked up a stool and slammed it into the side of Miller's head. Miller's cheekbone crunched beneath the blow and he tumbled aside with a cry of pain. His vision blinked off sporadically.

Con Nhen dropped the stool beside Miller's head and snatched a tool from the floor. Miller couldn't see the device in Con Nhen's hands through the blood dripping into his eyes. His shattered cheekbone throbbed beneath his skin.

Con Nhen sat down on the stool and sucked on his joint. He stooped down and stared into Miller's eyes. Miller refused to break eye contact despite his mounting panic and overwhelming pain. He panted through his clenched teeth. Con Nhen sneered at him.

"Let's talk, demon," Con Nhen drawled. He dangled a hammer in front of Miller's face.

Miller caught his breath.

"I noticed that you keep a cross tied to your blade," Con Nhen said. He thumbed the ka-bar tucked into his belt. The dangling rosary

was flecked with Miller's dried blood.

"I've seen the cross before," Con Nhen continued. "Back when French missionaries used to come to our villages to build churches. They said they were trying to help us. They promised us forgiveness for our sins, for our 'primitive nature', if we repented to your god. "I attended confession once, long before the Americans arrived. I wanted to ask forgiveness, but what was the point? My words fell on deaf ears. There was no one listening other than a pious monk silently judging a poor, uneducated fool. There is no forgiveness; only judgment."

Con Nhen leaned closer to Miller's face. Miller could smell the sickly sweet opium crawling from Con Nhen's lips. He panted and tugged at his ropes. Con Nhen smiled and exhaled a plume of smoke into Miller's face.

"Do you believe you will be forgiven for your sins, demon?"

Miller shook his head.

"If you're going to torture me, just do it," Miller said. "Don't talk me to death."

Con Nhen sucked on the joint. The cherry flickered in his black eyes. Smoke dripped out of his lips and traced the scars carved through his chin. He tapped the hammer against Miller's crushed cheekbone. Miller flinched, stifling a cry of pain.

"If you beg forgiveness, I will release you from suffering," Con Nhen drawled. "If you tell me why there are Americans in my valley, I will put a bullet in your temple and end your pain. You can find peace in oblivion- *I* have. But if you continue to test my patience, you will know suffering until the day you wither away to a screaming death. Your choice."

Miller tried to slow his breathing. He glared at Con Nhen.

"Come, demon," Con Nhen said. "Take the apple."

Miller squirmed silently in the mud, pulling at his binds.

Con Nhen's fingers slithered around Miller's throat and constricted. Miller gasped for air. The hammer clicked against Miller's teeth and he became still. The hammer tapped in time with Miller's drumming heartbeat. The hammer clicked faster, until it rose to a crescendo, and Con Nhen brought it high above Miller's head.

"No, *no*."

Con Nhen slammed the hammer into Miller's collarbone. Miller screamed and collapsed, but Con Nhen pulled him back up into a sitting position. He shook the hammer in Miller's face.

“Why are you demons raping my land?” Con Nhen asked. “Confess and find forgiveness.”

“Fuck you!” Miller cried.

Con Nhen cracked the hammer against Miller’s lower jaw and broke two teeth. Miller screamed and sputtered blood. The teeth danced across his tongue and bounced down the back of his throat. He choked and retched; he could feel the teeth scraping his esophagus. Con Nhen slammed Miller’s head against the thatch wall, and pain exploded through his skull.

"I'm just getting started," Con Nhen hissed. "*Confess.*"

"*You're psycho,*" Miller screamed, "*You're fucking sick!*"

Con Nhen brushed the hammer head against the welt on Miller's cheek. The softest touch scorched his nerves. Miller couldn't think through the fire spreading through his flesh.

"Who sent you?" Con Nhen asked.

"The devil," Miller spat.

Con Nhen stabbed the curved edge of the hammer into Miller's welt and pried it open. Miller screamed and kicked wildly. Blood filled his mouth and poured down his face. He felt like he had been struck by lightning.

While Miller spasmed uncontrollably, Con Nhen threw the hammer aside and drew the Ka-Bar from his belt. He pressed the cutting edge of the blade beneath Miller's eye. Miller kicked uselessly. Con Nhen exhaled smoke into Miller's face.

"I believe you, demon," Con Nhen said. "You were brought to my homeland to make us shed the blood of our brothers; you kill and rape our families and burn our villages to the ground; you poison our crops and starve us to death. You are a pawn for a machine of destruction. You exist to bring our land to hell. I'm going to purge the demons from this valley, but first I need a name."

Con Nhen took the blade away from Miller's eye and pressed the tip into the palm of Miller's hands. Miller writhed beneath him.

"What is the name of the devil that sent you, demon?" Con Nhen asked.

"I'm not a demon," Miller said, "*I swear.*"

"Silver tongued devil, crocodile tears," Con Nhen sneered. "Lying is in your nature. You lie to yourself to believe you aren't a wicked monster; you lie to a phony god that you're innocent; you lie to yourself to believe in any forgiveness. There is no forgiveness; there is only escape. I can let you escape to oblivion. Confess your sins and I will let you escape your suffering, demon."

"I'm not a demon!" Miller screamed. "I'm not!"

"Confess, demon!" Con Nhen barked. "Admit your sins!"

"I'm not!" Miller screamed, "I'm not!"

Con Nhen slammed his fist into the back of Miller's head. Miller's nose crumpled into the mud and he choked on blood. Con Nhen pulled him back by his hair and slammed his head repeatedly into the floor.

“Confess!” Con Nhen shouted. He hooked his fingers into Miller’s lips and prodded the gums where his missing teeth had been. Miller gagged and shrieked.

“Confess!” Con Nhen shouted.

“*Never!*” Miller cried.

Con Nhen pulled Miller’s head back and strangled him. He pounded the back of his skull with the sharp ends of his elbows, cracked his knuckles against bone, and pulled the hair out of his scalp, all while repeating his chant.

“*Confess! Confess! Confess!*”

“*No, please!*”

Con Nhen let go of Miller’s head, letting him suffocate in the mud. Miller begged desperately as he fought to breathe. Con Nhen growled irritably and took in a deep lungful of opium. He exhaled slowly, letting his muscles relax. Miller craned back his head, gasping for air.

“Please,” Miller coughed, “Please-“

Con Nhen shoved the tip of the blade into the palm of Miller’s hands. Miller wheezed through a mouthful of mud. Con Nhen panted and pushed the Ka-Bar until blood welled around the blade. The slow injection of steel made Miller shriek.

“Confess,” Con Nhen hissed.

“Please,” Miller screamed, “*Please!*”

Con Nhen snarled and pushed the Ka-Bar through the palms of Miller’s hands, slicing tendons and ligaments. Miller howled and thrashed while Con Nhen remained still over him. Con Nhen waited until Miller’s screams descended to a desperate, whimpering moan. Miller felt the rosary brush his skin. He fought the pain in his hands and clawed for the crucifix, but it remained out of reach.

“Confess,” Con Nhen whispered.

Dead bodies filled Miller’s head. He saw a dead child in his arms, a little girl. She was placed gently atop a pile of corpses. The little girl stared at Miller with listless black eyes. Blood dripped from her silken black hair, and bullet wounds were decorated across her chest like medals.

Miller screamed into the mud and gasped for air. He screamed until his lungs felt like they would thread apart. Miller screamed and sobbed, burying his head lower. The blade opened a well of suppressed emotions Miller had never dared to touch. It was overwhelming; he felt close to death, edging towards oblivion.

Confession would save him, he had been promised.

Confess.

"I'm sorry," Miller gasped, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry..."

Con Nhen grinned.

"For what?"

"I...I'm *sorry!*" Miller suddenly wailed, his chest surging from the outburst, "I'm so sorry, God, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to! Please, please god, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please, please, forgive me, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

His chanting fell to a sobbing whimper.

Con Nhen laughed and pulled the crucifix away from Miller's hands, tying it back around the hilt of the blade. Miller longed for the touch of the cross, but it was gone. He wasn't sure that touch would ever return.

"There is no god here," Con Nhen whispered. "And now that you've repented, we can begin the *true* torture. Tell me...where are your friends?"

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE – LEGION

The patrol boat was lost in a storm of crashing waves and stampeding animals. The bellowing of the triceratops herd deafened Ryan's screams. He clung to the railing as the boat was thrown from side to side by the bucking herbivores. A pair of horns scraped across the boat's hull, and a triceratops kicked the boat's stern, shoving it forward. Waves sprayed up the side of the boat and crashed onto the men on board. Unseen predators barked and hissed from the shoreline.

Ryan pressed himself against the floor of the boat as a pair of horns swung over the railing. He looked up to see a triceratops stretching its beaked jaws wide over his head, howling like a foghorn. The dinosaur's crest was a flare of crimson against the splendid blue sky. Water droplets shimmered in the air. Ryan barely had time to absorb the image until a second triceratops charged into the boat from behind, sending the craft careening into the air.

Ryan fell towards the boat's dipping nose. Eli and Ibex tumbled past Ryan towards the open water. Another triceratops slammed its tail against the underbelly of the boat and tossed the ship back into the

air. The boat crashed onto its belly in the rolling waves. The triceratops herd trampled down-river from the men. The boat evened out, and the current slowly carried them away from the panicked herbivores.

Ryan fought his nausea and pulled himself over the dented railing. He choked and spat beneath his mask. The majority of the herd was behind them, but a few lingering triceratops were staggering ahead. Ryan did a quick head count and exhaled; nobody had been thrown overboard.

"Is-is everybody okay?" Ryan asked.

"Ozzie's out cold," Bishop yelled back. He was at the bow of the ship, crouched over Ozzie's unconscious frame. The other members of the black ops team were climbing to their feet beside him.

"Is he alive?" Ryan asked.

"Somewhat."

"Good enough," Ryan grunted. "Xavier, how is everyone?"

Xavier scrambled to his feet and looked over the others. Andrei was curled around the medical supplies. Eli was vomiting beside him. Logan seemed unnaturally placid. His eyes flicked across Ryan's face and he nodded quickly.

Ryan waited until his head stopped spinning and slowly stood on trembling legs. The stygimoloch colony fled the river banks and vanished into the jungle. The majority of the triceratops herd stampeded around a bend in the south side of the river and vanished behind the walls of banyan trees.

It was then that Ryan saw the shapes of the animals chasing the triceratops. He caught brief flashes of long, obsidian-scaled bodies sprinting through the undergrowth, weaving around the tree trunks.

The dark, lithe carnivores poured from the tree line and dipped into the river, slithering through the water to pursue their escaping prey. More of the predators came bounding out of the jungle; they were long-limbed crocodilians with nimble, yet heavily-armored bodies. Their blunt snouts were full of teeth like warhog tusks. The beasts galloped along the shoreline with astonishing speed. Ryan stared, horrified.

"Andrei, what the hell are those things!?" Ryan shouted.

Andrei didn't answer.

Ryan turned around and saw Andrei clawing at the packaging of a morphine syrette. Ryan sprang across the boat and snatched the

package from Andrei's hands. Andrei immediately dug his talons into Ryan's wrists and squealed, "No, I need it! *I need it!!!*"

"No, you don't!" Ryan shouted, and he shoved Andrei aside.

Andrei collapsed beside Eli and scrambled away like a feral rodent. His arched back was knotted with bulging vertebrae. Ryan was repulsed; Andrei was practically frothing at the mouth.

"Give it to me!" Andrei screamed. "*Give it to me!*"

"No, you goddamn coward!" Ryan yelled. "We need you now, and you're useless doped up. Face reality; we're fucked without you. Tell us what the hell is happening, what the hell these things are, or else we're all going to die!"

"I don't give a shit, just give it to me!" Andrei howled, and he dove for Ryan's legs. Ryan kned him in the jaw and flung the syrette over the boat.

Andrei nearly threw himself overboard to catch the airborne syrette. One of the crocodilian beasts leapt from the water, its jaws opened wide to catch Andrei's neck. Ryan grabbed Andrei by the belt and yanked him back into the boat just as the beast slammed its jaws shut with a powerful *crack*.

Ryan landed onto Andrei on the floor of the boat as the beast splashed back into the water. "You see?!" Ryan yelled.

"Get off of me!" Andrei screamed.

"Do you fucking see?!" Ryan barked. "That morphine isn't going to make this go away; it's only going to let you die in peace. Do you think you're the only one who deserves to die a painless death? Fuck you, tell us how to survive!"

"No!" Andrei choked, shaking his head. "No, no, no, no-, " Ryan slapped Andrei hard across the face.

"I know what you want," Ryan said. "Believe me, I want it even more. I'd give anything to have that feeling again, but it's just a distraction! Quit trying to escape this and help us all escape with our lives!"

Ryan shook Andrei and banged his head against the floor.

"*Help us!*"

One of the crocodilian beasts began climbing over the side of the boat. Its long arms squeezed the railing. The animal snapped its jaws like a steel trap as it looked at the men on the floor of the boat.

Xavier and Bishop fired their rifles at the animal, but their bullets barely penetrated its thick hide. The crocodile hissed at Xavier, and

Eli snuck up beside the beast. He placed the barrel of his shotgun against the animal's neck and pulled the trigger. The slug burst through the animal's neck and sprayed flesh through the exit wound on the other side.

The crocodile went limp and slid off of the boat. More crocodiles started scratching at the metal hull, hoisting themselves up onto the railing. Other crocodiles leapt bodily into the air, thrashing their tails as the sunlight shimmered across their scales and scutes. The men in the boat started shouting and fired their rifles at the attacking creatures. Ryan stared wide-eyed at the animals and looked back at Andrei, gripping him by the collar.

"Help us!" Ryan screamed.

"Kaprosochus!" Andrei cried. *"Kaprosochus, boar-crocs! They're prehistoric crocodiles; they run on land and swim even better. They travel in hordes and mob their prey to death. They're drawn to movement. They see something run, and they chase it down and tear it apart like piranha! We're fucking dead, man, dead!"*

A bellowing triceratops barreled past, shouldering the boat against the river bank. Ryan watched as the kaprosochus gave chase. There were dozens of them, all as big as full-grown bears with dragging tails. They pounced on top of the triceratops, agile as jungle cats, and started shearing hunks of flesh from bone.

The triceratops howled and tried to shake off the relentless predators, but there were too many. They climbed over the triceratops and ravaged it. The triceratops appeared to be melting beneath the dog-pile into a river of boiling blood. The air was filled with snorting, hissing, and the agonized cries of the triceratops. The kaprosochus attacked more aggressively with each torrent of spilled blood. A pair of the beasts gnawed on the triceratops's horns and pinned its head beneath the water. Several other kaprosochus tore the triceratops's calves open and pried at the bone. The triceratops gurgled a hideous death rattle as it descended beneath the crimson waves.

The dog-pile of hissing, writhing reptiles fought viciously for every morsel of flesh. The smaller kaprosochus fell into the jaws of the elders and were torn apart with equal ferocity. Ryan's eyes were bulging open as he watched the beasts slink away from the carcass. All that was left was the badly broken crest of the triceratops's skull poking out of the water like an ivory sail.

The kaprosochus began swimming towards the boat.

“Bishop, get us out of here!” Ryan screamed. “Move this fucking boat!”

Bishop slung his rifle over his shoulder and ran to the steering column. The engine growled and the boat shuddered. The propellers churned mud and spat water. Smoke drifted from the engine. Bishop glanced over his shoulder.

“We’re mired in the mud,” Bishop yelled. “We can’t move!”

The kaprosuchus horde began climbing over the railing. The men opened fire and spent bullet casings tinkled like bells across the floor. Red water washed over the boat. Ryan knew they had to get out of the mud, but it would take everybody’s help to push the boat off of the river bank.

There was no way they could defend themselves any longer; kaprosuchus were throwing themselves at the boat from every angle, spraying blood at the men, barking and snapping their jaws. Andrei curled in a ball at Ryan’s feet. He said they were drawn to movement...

Ryan swallowed dryly when he realized what had to be done.

“We need to get these things away from us,” Ryan shouted. “We need a distraction. I’ll lead them away; Bishop, you get everybody off the boat and try to push it off of the shore. Go upstream and wait for me. I’ll try to find a tree to climb and hide in. If these boar-crocs haven’t left by the time you come back, just go on without me. Find Miller. Bring him back alive.”

“I’ll do it.”

Logan stood before Ryan with his rifle in hand.

Ryan gawked at Logan.

“You can’t,” Ryan said. “I won’t let you.”

“I have to,” Logan said. His eyes twitched. “Don’t come back.”

Before Ryan could object, Logan swung his legs over the railing and he splashed into the water. Ryan’s eyes shot open and he ran to the railing Logan had jumped from. He heard the ear-splitting *crack* of Logan’s M40 and a kaprosuchus howled in pain. Ryan stared over the railing as Logan waded waist-deep in the boiling blood. The kaprosuchus turned away from the boat and slithered through the water after him.

Ryan fired his rifle at the kaprosuchus and shouted, “Xavier, Ibex, give Logan cover-fire! Everybody else, off the boat! We need to get this thing moving!”

Logan fired his rifle to draw the kaprosuchus horde's attention. They slunk away from the boat and slid through the river towards him. Panting, Logan turned away from the animals and kicked desperately to the opposite river bank. Luckily, this section of river was narrow, so he was able to close the distance quickly.

Logan thrashed towards the shore line, swinging the rifle over his head. When he looked over his shoulder he saw that dozens of kaprosuchus were gliding after him. His boots met the rise of the river bank and he crawled out, clawing through the slick mud as gunshots peppered the water behind him. The animals moved through the hail of bullets unhindered.

Logan dragged himself through the palm plants and ivy growing along the shore and sprinted into the deeper confines of the jungle. The voices in his head screamed after him.

"Bastard!"

"Retard!"

"Freak!"

Logan remained calm. He had only known one escape from the voices; combat. He found balance when the chaos of battle matched the storm within his skull. The voices blended with the roaring kaprosuchus, giving his demons physical bodies.

The horde of predators stampeded after him as swift as lions. The kaprosuchus pounced over fallen tree trunks and tore through the undergrowth, snapping at Logan's heels. Logan panted and pumped his arms. His legs felt drained of blood. The kaprosuchus roared, *"Useless freak! Fucking retard! Murderer, murderer!"*

"Shut up!" Logan screamed. He spun around and fired a round from his M40 into the gaping jaws of a lunging kaprosuchus. The bullet slammed into the back of the animal's throat and it collapsed, rolling across the forest floor. Several other kaprosuchus trampled it and a few more stopped to cannibalize the corpse.

Logan kept running, looking over his shoulder, and when he looked forward he saw a tree branch swing towards his face. He dove, rolled, found his footing, and kept running.

Logan wasn't afraid. The kaprosuchus provided him a face for the monsters inside of his head. They were a target to strike; a way to fight back. He wasn't afraid of death; death meant escape. He knew it would. If there was a chance he would meet Gerald again, he would never be afraid. The voices could follow him to eternity, but Gerald would be there to keep the demons at bay.

The kaprosuchus were crashing through the forest around Logan, howling obscenities.

“Gerald’s *dead*! He’s fucking *dead*, you monster! You fucking freak! *Faggot freak!*”

Logan recognized the voice of his father as well as Eli and his friends. It nearly stunned him; he glanced over his shoulder and saw a kaprosuchus panting at his backside. His foot caught a root, and he fell to his knees at the base of a leviathan fig tree.

The fig tree’s ancient figure was swollen with lecherous vines and parasitic ivy. Logan stared up at the lush canopy and saw bright pink fruit. He almost wished he could have tasted one; he hadn’t eaten in days.

Several kaprosuchus burst from the surrounding foliage. Logan opened fire, but there were too many of them. The beasts crushed him against the rough bark, and their tusks broke through the bones of his legs. Pain exploded through Logan’s body and he screamed upon revelation. The animals stripped the flesh from Logan’s ribs with their claws, and they wrenched away his limbs in their jaws. The voices distorted to demonic screams that slurred with his own. A kaprosuchus took Logan’s throat in its jaws and raised him towards the light pouring through the fig tree’s canopy. It appeared otherworldly bright; too intense to stare at yet impossible to look away from.

Logan wasn’t afraid. He had killed more men than he could count. He had slaughtered his father and countless other horrendous monsters that plagued the earth. He was an angel of death, killing those that others were too weak to stop.

Logan wore those deaths like badges of honor. The sins of his tasks seeped from his bones and fueled the voices, but they were wrong. Gerald had told him they were. Logan believed him.

Logan felt tusks sink through his throat and emerge like thorns through the opposite side of his neck. The sunlight flared through the treetops like a nuclear detonation in Logan’s eyes. His agony overtook the voices and gave way to the peaceful silence of the ambient jungle.

The kaprosuchus gnawing on Logan’s neck hissed lowly. The brush of its breath was gentle and soothing across his skin. He could feel his body slipping away. The silence was broken by a familiar voice in the waning light.

“You’re a goddamned hero, Logan.”

The light enveloped him. His body was gone. The kaprosuchus was gone. He felt himself lost within the bliss.

“G-Gerald?”

“You’re a goddamned hero, Logan. Don’t ever forget that.”

“Push!” Ryan yelled.

The men gave one last shove, and the boat slid from the bank and bobbed into the open water. The group of men immediately scrambled onto the boat and aimed their rifles at the tree line. Bishop ran to the steering column and revved the engine. The boat surged forward. He gave a shout of joy, but it was half-hearted and flat.

Ryan leaned over the railing and tugged on his mask. His fingers trembled. The roars of the kaprosuchus in the jungle had given way to low growls and the crunching of bone. His eyes flicked across the tree line.

“Come on, Logan,” Ryan whispered. “Come on...”

Eli and Xavier flanked Ryan. They stared solemnly at the forest. The air was still.

“Ryan, we’re good to go! Let’s move!” Bishop shouted.

“Just wait,” Ryan snapped. “He’ll be here!”

The forest waved in the breeze. Several kaprosuchus emerged from the undergrowth, snarling with their tusks bared. They sank into the water and swam towards the boat. Ibex and Shadow opened fire to keep them at bay. The kaprosuchus circled the craft. Ryan dug his fingernails beneath his mask until he drew blood.

“Please, Logan, please,” Ryan hissed. “I’m sorry.”

Eli drank from his flask. He swayed in the wind. Xavier let go of a shuddering breath and ran his hands through his hair. He shook his head and turned away, pacing across the boat. Ryan squeezed his jawbone until it throbbed. His eyes were twitching and bloodshot.

“Please, Logan,” Ryan whispered.

“C’mon, Ryan!” Bishop shouted. A kaprosuchus lunged at the boat and Shadow struck it down with a slug from his shotgun. The kaprosuchus snarled and swam away to a safe distance.

Ryan stared at the tree line until one final kaprosuchus came out to watch him. The beast trotted through the tree-line, staring at Ryan with a reptilian Cheshire grin.

Ryan met the black marbles of the beast’s eyes, and when he saw its jaws, his body went numb. The voices of the men on the boat faded

away. He felt himself become hollow. A storm swirled through his stomach.

“Go on, Bishop,” Ryan said. He turned away, putting a hand over his face. “Just go.”

The kaprosuchus watched as the boat rumbled away. Ensnared in the animal’s tusks, dripping thick scarlet droplets of blood, was Logan’s confederate bandana.

CHAPTER THIRTY – CONFESSION

A sudden silence overtook the Viet Cong internment camp. The Viet Cong were frozen mid-step; heavy footfalls echoed throughout the forest beyond the perimeter. Without a word, they took buckets of rain water and doused the fire at the center of the clearing. The billowing smoke became trapped beneath the impenetrable canopy. A cement haze filled the air beneath the shaggy tree-tops.

The footsteps grew in volume and power. The trees shook and drizzled water onto the heads of the men below. The Viet Cong grabbed their rifles and took cover behind lead oil drums and wooden crates. A baritone growl rattled the thatch huts throughout the camp. The men stared over their rifles at the wall of smoke and waited in tense silence.

The shadow of an immense behemoth formed within the smoke. Nguyen recognized the boxy head and black mane of the Father Tyrannosaurus drifting through the white veil. The Father Tyrannosaurus rumbled lowly and huffed, blowing smoke from its nostrils. The behemoth snorted and sneezed.

The Viet Cong stared, unmoving. The jungle was silent around them. Nguyen cowered in his cage, wondering if the iron bars of his tiny prison could withstand the jaws of the mighty beast.

With an irritated groan, the Father Tyrannosaurus circled around the perimeter of the camp and continued on his wayward journey through the forest to his far-away nest. Once the footsteps faded away to silence and the chatter of wildlife returned, the Viet Cong returned to their duties.

Nguyen stared, stunned. How long had the Viet Cong been surviving amongst these ravenous beasts? He couldn’t fathom a day amongst dinosaurs, let alone weeks or even *years*. Nguyen still had no knowledge of the dinosaurs or how they had come to reside in the valley. He silently hoped that none of the dinosaurs would ever migrate to his home, or the other villages further south.

It was bad enough that his homeland was wrought in a civil war;

adding dinosaurs to the mix could be disastrous for the already-struggling citizens.

Nguyen broke from this chain of thoughts when he saw Miller being dragged towards the cage next to his own. Miller was pulled along limply like a cadaver between a pair of armed guards. Nguyen pressed against the bars of his cage and opened his mouth to yell, but he thought better of it. It would be best if the Viet Cong didn't know that they knew each other.

That was something Ozzie had taught him; when captured, always assume total deniability. Never admit the truth.

The guerillas heaved Miller into the cage beside Nguyen's and snapped the padlock shut. One of the guerillas cracked the butt of his rifle against Nguyen's fingers. Nguyen recoiled, and the guerilla laughed. Nguyen glared as the guerillas walked away. Once they were gone, he turned to face Miller.

"Hey, GI," Nguyen whispered. "Wake up!"

Miller remained motionless. He was slumped against the corner of his cage with his back to Nguyen. His chest rose and fell with wet respirations. His bare back was slashed and bleeding. It looked like Con Nhen had whipped Miller until his skin had split open.

"*Wake up, GI*," Nguyen whispered urgently. "We have to get out of here! I've been listening to the Viet Cong, and they say they'll kill us if you don't talk. Come on, GI, speak to me!"

Miller stared at the smoldering fire pit. He feigned unconsciousness. He felt a familiar sensation of death, of hollowness beneath the skin. He had felt it before when he took the lives of the innocent. It was a feeling he had struggled with for countless sleepless nights while staring at the rosary his grandmother had given him.

He had tried to find meaning for his existence on those nights as he stared at the silver face of Christ, yet found none. He asked why he was allowed to live, but he never found any answers.

"GI, please," Nguyen pleaded, "We need to get out of here!"

Miller slowly exhaled. His chest throbbed from Con Nhen's relentless beatings. The gouged sore on his cheek was caked with half-dried blood and filth. The sockets of his missing teeth had become dry and irritated. He tongued the wounds carefully and felt a fiery surge of pain through his skull. He moaned and put a hand over his swollen, battered face.

"There's no way out," Miller whispered. It hurt to speak; consciousness alone was suffering.

"What are you talking about? Of course there is! You're a Special Forces; you should know what to do..." Nguyen lowered his voice, warily looking at the Viet Cong nearby. "Ozzie told me you were a member of *Vulture Squad*. Aren't you supposed to be the best of the American military?"

Miller coughed, shaking his head. "I'm a Vulture, alright. Moving through graveyards, collecting the dead. I'm a monster, Nguyen. You don't want anything to do with me. I've killed more of your people than any of these Viet Cong here."

"I don't care about who you've killed, GI," Nguyen whispered, clutching the bars of his cage. "All that matters is that we get out of here so we can keep fighting. We don't have to die here. You don't have to suffer anymore. We can still escape."

"There is no escape from this," Miller said, sighing. "This is it."

"We can escape, we just need a plan. Don't you want to escape, GI?"

"I don't deserve to escape," Miller wheezed; his damaged ribs prevented him from taking deep breaths. "This is what I've earned." "Nobody deserves this," Nguyen said. "You have nothing to feel guilty for."

Miller watched the campfire swell as it was fed fresh kindling by the guerrillas. He saw Hue City in the flames. Images of bloodshed and unrestrained slaughter coursed through his mind. He could see the faces of the scores of men he had killed in those flames; men screaming as they were mowed down by his rifle, others howling as he butchered them with entrenching shovels and ka-bars. The visage of his atrocities made him choke and sob. He put his hands over his eyes and buried his fingers into his scalp.

"I'm sorry," Miller whimpered. "I'm weak, and I'm scared. I've always been scared...it makes you do terrible things. You'd do anything to kill the fear. The paranoia, it's like a poison, a disease, and you can't stop it. You can't fight it..."

"What are you talking about?" Nguyen asked.

"I've done things," Miller said, "Evil things. This is what I deserve for my crimes."

Nguyen shook his head. "I told you, GI, I don't care what you've done; the past is the past. You can't change what you've done, but you can redeem yourself. You can get us out of here and do good in the future. The past doesn't determine your future - only you do. You can do with tomorrow what you want, but we need to escape

in order to do that, so please, just help me.”

Miller shook his head and buried his face into his arms. He rocked back and forth on his heels as images of bloodshed and madness flew through his mind. The memories were taking him to a horrible place that he never wanted to see again; a small village on the outskirts of the Han River. Tears flowed freely down his face as he tried to stop the flow of violence behind his closed eyes. He would give anything to escape this wretched memory.

“God, help me,” Miller cried feebly.

“GI, please,” Nguyen pleaded.

Miller returned to the memory that cursed his dreams. He saw himself kneeling at the lip of a mass grave, praying into the mud as rain lashed his skin. Miller sucked back his breath and wiped his eyes. Blood smeared across his face; it covered his skin like lichen on tree bark. He had seen blood this thick pooling at the bottom of a grave where the lives of an entire community had been emptied into.

Miller remembered how the crows had hopped across the pale foreheads and bare torsos of the slain Vietnamese villagers as if they were stepping stones.

Miller opened his eyes and looked at the wounds on the palms of his hands. They looked like the bloodied eyes of a child staring back at him.

“I’ve killed,” Miller said, his voice breaking. “I’ve killed your people, Nguyen. Innocent people. Your brothers, sisters, your families. I’ve killed so many of your kind. I won’t let you die because I’m afraid. I won’t have another innocent person die because of my fear. I promise you, we’ll escape.”

“Yes!” Nguyen said, “We’ll escape!”

“Escape,” Miller hissed through his teeth. He tongued the splinters of bone in his gums. The pain accelerated the adrenaline in his body. He sucked air until his ribs cracked and popped. Miller met Nguyen’s eyes; Nguyen was too young for this war, he thought. His face was soft and unblemished. His almond eyes shone with fear. Miller had seen similar eyes, wide with fear, at the end of his rifle barrel countless times before.

“I won’t let you die, Nguyen,” Miller said, “We’re going to escape. By nightfall, we’ll both be free men. I promise.”

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE - HUMANS

Leon felt buried alive inside of the infirmary.

The air was as still and silent as the interior of a coffin. The darkness and drugs blurred the features of everything beyond his bed. The stifled air was smothering him like shoveled dirt. He could hardly discern his own presence inside of the empty room. His heart thumped dully within his hollow chest and his soft, fluttering respirations turned mute between his cracked lips.

As far as Leon could tell, he was no longer in Vietnam; he was entombed in a mausoleum, wrapped in sheets like a fresh corpse awaiting burial.

Life in Vietnam would continue unabated without Leon. The rest of Vulture Squad would be trekking through the jungle, listening to the lullaby of the nocturnal animals that used to sing him to sleep. The moon would fill the night sky with its shining body, bathing the jungle in silver light, and countless stars would flow around it like dripping white paint. The air would be lush and fresh, stirred by gentle winds and fragile rainfall.

While Vulture Squad journeyed through the nighttime jungle, Leon would be buried beneath his sheets, waiting to see what lay beyond his purgatory.

Leon fingered open the blinds of his bedside window and intense light burned through the cracks. It was still daytime; he had been drifting through his morphine daze for so long he had assumed it was night. The dark clouds of an approaching storm were climbing over the distant mountaintops. A helicopter landed outside and a platoon of Army Rangers poured out.

The soldiers seemed so full of vigor; alive with the same energy Leon had felt when he first set foot in the valley. All of that youthful exuberance had bled out and left a skinned husk in its place. Leon felt a searing pang and gripped his stomach.

Leon had come so close to death that he could feel its presence sitting in the shadows of the infirmary, waiting for him to slip back into unconsciousness. He shuddered; he could still feel the talons of the utahraptor penetrating his young flesh, probing his innards. When the utahraptor entered his body, it left something behind. The utahraptor's violation would remain behind a wall of scars until the day it would gnaw its way out and tear him in two.

Leon exhaled and sank back into the arms of his morphine high. The sudden flare of pain had been a reminder of his own existence, but the sensation passed. Leon felt a sudden longing for it; his

presence had been solidified by his physical suffering. It was proof that he was more than just an empty shell.

He gritted his teeth and shoved his fingers against his wounds to feel that bittersweet pain, but it was diluted by the opiates. His body remained as still as a cadaver.

The door clicked open and sunlight poured in. Leon watched as a shadow swam through the light and felt a sudden panic rise in his chest. He balled his fists and watched as Susan followed the shadow inside. She turned and shut the door, closing the room off from the light and fresh air of the outside world.

Leon took as deep of a breath as he could in an attempt to relish the lush, chilled air, but the wound on his abdomen prevented him.

Leon doubled over and coughed haggardly into his fist. Susan grabbed a glass of water and ran to his side, extending it for him to take.

"Here, drink this," Susan said. "You need to take it easy, Leon. You can't aggravate your stitches."

Leon gave a soft grunt and swallowed the water. He savored the icy relief on his arid throat. Susan's voice warmed the air around him and lifted the weight of the darkness from his shoulders. Leon cleared his throat and sat the empty glass on his bedside table.

"It's so dark in here, you would think it was night," Susan said.

Leon stared as she drew the blinds and filled the room with pale light. Leon traced the elegant curvature of her body with his eyes. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders like a waterfall of obsidian, dripping towards the small of her back in crisp curls.

"I didn't wake you up, did I?" Susan asked, glancing over her shoulder.

"No, you didn't," Leon said. He quickly cast his gaze to the shadows sitting in the far corners of the room and shrugged half-heartedly. "I couldn't sleep...too many nightmares."

Susan pulled away from Leon's bed and glanced at his medical charts in the faint light. She squinted and briefly looked at Leon. Leon's face shined white like a skull, and his sockets were painted black with shadow. Susan clicked her tongue and shook her head, lowering the charts to the bedside table.

"How're you feeling, Leon?"

"Tired," he replied. "And my stomach hurts, but I'll be okay."

Susan rolled her eyes and laughed.

"Well, yeah, but that's not what I meant," she said. "I mean, how do

you feel? You went through a lot out there in the jungle, with all the injuries you sustained.”

She stared out the window at the dark, jagged shapes of the jungle canopy. “You looked like you were run over by a thresher when I first saw you.”

Leon glanced at Susan’s face and followed her eyes to the rows of palm trees at the edge of the base. He shifted uncomfortably as he stared at the darkness growing beyond the electric fence and tree trunks; he swore he could feel the abyss staring back.

If what Andrei had said was true, were the utahraptors currently hunting him down? Were they stalking the outside of the base, waiting to attack? Leon shuddered and tore his eyes away from the bordering line of trees, the fringe between ruthless wilderness and their semblance of safety.

“I wanna go home,” Leon muttered, closing his eyes. “That’s all I’m feeling. I just want to go home and leave this life behind. I’m done.” Susan settled down into the chair beside Leon’s bed.

“Where’s home?”

Leon opened his eyes and glanced at Susan’s feet. Her shoes were ratty and crusted with Vietnam’s red soil like dried blood.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” Leon said flatly. His eyes were locked on the rust flaking from her soles. “Where are you from, Miss Wilcott?”

“Georgia,” Susan said. A smile tugged at her lips. “The filthy, dirty south. I loved it. I was always a tomboy. I wanted to help people, so I got my PhD and got hired on by Jericho. I wanted to help soldiers - they always seemed like they were the ones who needed help the most.”

Leon studied the crinkles in her eyes as she spoke, the way the sunlight shone across her teeth, her flawless features. He was lost in the sound of her voice like a child in warm blankets. He wanted to sleep within the peace of that voice.

“So, how did you end up here?” Susan asked. “Where are you from?”

Leon mustered as deep of a breath as he could. It was difficult for him to summon images of his past life, now that he had spent a year in the bush. He tied his eyes shut and concentrated on painting an image of the life he had once known. It was like trying to remember a bedtime story from his childhood.

“I’m from Floyd, Virginia,” Leon said slowly. “It’s a small town.

Everybody knows each other. There wasn't much to do when I was growing up; I spent most of my time goofing off with friends or studying. I really wanted to go to college, but I didn't have the money for it. I would have gone if I could have afforded it. I wanted to learn as much as I could; physics, chemistry, biology, microbiology, anything. I loved science and math."

Susan was silent as she studied Leon's pained expression. His jaw was slack, and his open palms shook. Leon swallowed and steadied his breathing.

"I was drafted," Leon said. "I was trained in demolitions and explosive ordinance because I understood physics and chemistry. I thought I'd be applying my knowledge, but all I did was sweep mines and plant claymores. After that, I started working with anti-tank weaponry, like rockets and mortars.

"Ryan, my captain, saw me on a mission and thought I was good. He said he saw something in me. He recruited me onto his team and I became the youngest member they ever had. Ryan always told me I'd have a bright future if I stayed, but I can't."

Leon shook his head, and his voice began to crack.

"I can't, Miss Wilcott. I wanna go home."

"But you are going home, aren't you?" Susan asked. "You should be happy, Leon. You're getting a chance to get out of something that most men never get to walk away from."

Leon put a hand over his mouth. His eyes began to water.

"I don't know how I could ever leave this place, Miss Wilcott. What can I say to my friends or family if I go home? The things I've seen, the things I've done, I can never talk about it. They'll never understand what it means to be in burning villages, or to see kids my age get blown to bits by land mines and IEDs, or what it's like to destroy a truck full of people. They'll never understand."

"It'll be okay," Susan said.

"No, it won't!" Leon shouted, slamming his fists onto his tray-table.

"It'll never be okay! I've killed people, Miss Wilcott! I saw one of my best friends get torn in half, hell, I nearly got torn in half *myself*. I've seen things that I can never forget, and I'll always know what's out there in the jungle!"

Utahraptors flashed through Leon's mind like a migraine, and he doubled over. He shoved his palms against his temples until his vision blurred. He could feel the claws splitting him open, his organs spilling wetly into his hands. Susan reached out to Leon, and

he flinched from her touch. Susan pulled her hands away as Leon sobbed.

"I know things, Miss Wilcott, things that I'll never forget," Leon cried. "I know what the real world is like, and it's not my home. That small town, that stupid little town, it's a *lie*! It's a goddamned *lie*! The real world is where my real friends are risking their lives to save our friend.

"Vietnam, that's what real life is. It's the jungle; it's the endless darkness and paranoia. It's the things that are always stalking you, thirsting for you, waiting to tear you to pieces like they did to Gerald. The real world is nothing but death, just killing to survive; it's not a small town in fucking *Virginia*!" he bellowed.

Susan watched Leon from the back of her seat. He was hyperventilating.

"I've seen the real world, Miss Wilcott," Leon panted, "And now I'll never be able to go home and live a lie. I'll never be the son my parents remember; I'll never be the kid my friends knew. My real friends are here, in the real world, in Vietnam. The people I knew back home, I'm not one of them anymore...they'll never understand."

Leon choked and gripped his wounded gut.

"There's a monster inside of me, Miss Wilcott, and it'll always be there beneath the surface. I'm just a mask for every fucking monster and ugly truth in Vietnam, and now that I know monsters are real, I'll never be human again."

Leon shielded himself from Susan's eyes, pitiful and weak.

Susan sat down beside Leon and put her arms around his shoulders.

"Breathe, Leon, just breathe. Settle down. Take deep breaths. See, doesn't that feel better? Slower. Deep breaths. Deeeep breaths."

Leon took long, wheezing breaths, but they were cut off by the searing wound in his stomach. His face shined with tears, and his eyes were bright red and bloodshot. His cries fell to a tortured moan. Susan soothed him like a baby, whispering softly as he tried to regain his breath. Very gently, she squeezed Leon's hands.

"It's okay, Leon," she said. "It'll be okay. I know that I haven't seen what you've seen, and that I'll never know what you went through, but that's how our country is. We're privileged to be ignorant of what the rest of the world goes through. We don't know what it's like to suffer in a place like Vietnam, or Angola, or Afghanistan. Only the people brave enough to see the rest of the world know

what it's like.

"For those people, they learn life's ugly truths. Bad things happen; people die gruesome deaths, people lose limbs, they burn to death, they starve, they lose their minds, so on and so forth. That's a part of life, though. Real life isn't all white picket fences and flowers. Life is everything. It's the fire that consumes a forest, and it's the rain that puts out the fire. It's all of the suffering and beauty in the world.

"For most people back home, they'll never understand that true suffering. They won't know the reality that the rest of the world has to live through. They won't be able to truly sympathize with what you've had to do or what you've seen. And yeah, the reality that you've lived through, everything you've had to see or do out there, it changes you. You'll never enter those jungles and come out the same man, Leon."

Susan shook her head, but she never took her eyes away from his. "The war, and your experiences in it, they become a part of you. It isn't *you*, though. *You're* you. Beneath your uniform and scars, you'll always *be* you. Men like Shadow and Ozzie, or Ryan and Eli; they've let their experiences *define* them. They've let the war become who they are. But you, Leon, you have a chance at a future. You have a chance to go home and make something else of your life. You can still make your life into whatever you want it to be, and just like you had to do here, you'll have to adapt and change to fit your new life. You have to evolve to survive."

Susan cupped Leon's face as a bittersweet smile spread across her own.

"That's what makes you human, Leon. All of your emotions- your pain, your trauma, your fears, and how you deal with them - that's what makes you human. It'll be hard to adjust once you go home, but you're a human, Leon. You can adapt. I know you can. If you survived out here, out in the jungle where your life was actually in danger, then you can survive a small town with white picket fences and unknowing civilians. You can do anything with your life, Leon. Don't let it go to waste."

Leon stared at the light reflected in Susan's eyes, the shimmering pond water of her irises. She smiled gently and stared into Leon's eyes, trying to see through the icy surface to the dark tempest and turmoil wrought beneath.

Leon struggled against tears, and with a painful wheeze, he leaned

forward and wrapped his heavy arms around Susan. She pulled him closer and he buried his face into her shoulder, soaking her shirt with tears.

"Please, don't leave me," Leon said, his voice muffled through her shirt. "Just stay with me until I can sleep."

"Shhh, shhh," Susan ran her fingers through Leon's hair. "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere. Just try to get some sleep, okay? Just try to get better. You're safe here."

Leon thought of the tyrannosaurus, the utahraptors, and the other monsters that prowled Vietnam. He would never be able to tell the truth of Vietnam to his loved ones, but he supposed it didn't matter. If the rest of the world ever caught on to the true horrors of Vietnam, they would surely adapt and change to their new reality, just as he and the rest of Vulture Squad were learning to do so. Susan pulled Leon tighter in her arms, and he buried himself into her, smothering his thoughts.

For now, he wanted to embrace the peace.

Sergei couldn't hide from the faces of death.

The dank cave Sergei had sought shelter in had become his womb. He had spent hours staring into the bullet wound gouged into his shoulder. He fingered the brass embedded in his flesh while in a mindless trance, prying with growing urgency as he watched the young Vietnamese boy's skull collapse in vivid detail. He memorized the way Pham Chi's face folded inward as a maroon cloud of ink flowed from the crown of his skull. It was an eternal cycle behind his eyes.

Sergei withheld a howl of pain as he tugged the bullet from his shoulder. Blood drained through his fingertips, and Pham Chi's skull burst from within the bloody hole in his flesh. Sergei cried and clutched his shoulder, rocking on his heels. Listless tears dripped from his unblinking eyes. Tolstoy would have been disgusted with him.

Sergei didn't possess Tolstoy's ruthless nature. Sergei's actions had left him cold, shivering, and numb to the world. He was a feral animal lost in panic. Blood flooded his empty thoughts. He knew if he was to save Nikita and fulfill the mission, he would have to be like Tolstoy. He would have to abandon any remorse for murder, to completely detach himself from his humanity.

Tolstoy would have treated Pham Chi like an animal; a soulless

creature of flesh and bone to be slaughtered. The Americans were prey, and Sergei was the predator. He needed to surrender himself to the wilderness in order to survive its horrors, the same horrors that had taken Aleksandr and Tolstoy's lives.

Sergei mewed and dug his nails into his eye sockets. Tolstoy howled in pain as he was pulled apart in the beaks of the quetzalcoatlus. Aleksandr gaped in a soundless scream, his stomach sliced open. Sergei had survived, and the horrors were nothing. He knew they were nothing but tragedies. The animals in the American base were the same as those monsters that had murdered his friends.

It was time for Sergei to find retribution, to have his revenge. He would make the monsters suffer for what they had done. He was stronger than the monsters; he was the greatest monster alive. He was Vietnam, primitive nature personified, a ravenous beast lusting for blood.

Sergei stopped rocking on his heels. His head reeled with the horrors that Vietnam had wrought on his fragile psyche. The blood flying from Pham Chi's skull ceased to make him shiver. The crimson was no longer an accusation, but a symbol of what must be done to survive. It was the Soviet flag, flapping from the corpse of a slain animal, food for the Great Russian Bear.

Tolstoy had trained him well; Sergei was inspired by the flickering imagery. He watched the violence until it became seamless with the mantra he whispered beneath his breath.

"We have to keep going, we have to fulfill the mission...we have to keep going, we have to fulfill the mission..."

Sergei was anxious to see the flag wave again. It was a symbol that what he was doing wasn't just for his and Nikita's own survival, but that this bloodshed was for a greater purpose. He was serving his Motherland, just as Tolstoy had been so proud to do before. It was his inspiration.

The proud decree of the soviet anthem roared in his ears. He was standing amongst dozens of his kind, animals bred to kill, uniforms starched, polished AK-47s spitting rounds in sync with the barking of their masters.

Sergei felt the weight of the Dragunov in his hands. He could sense the sheer power resting within the trigger; a single bullet would slaughter an American pig. The predator was ready to hunt, and it made him feel like a god. The power of knowing that he controlled

a man's life was the greatest high he had ever known. With the flag waving behind his eyes, he rose from the cave and climbed through the yawning mouth into the waning sunlight, reborn as a monster conceived by man. He imagined the posters that had inspired him to enlist; a soviet soldier, a perfect specimen of the ultimate man, standing atop the rubble of crumbled buildings in Berlin, the golden hammer and sickle fluttering in red waves behind his head. Sergei finally felt like that hero, like Tolstoy had promised him he would become. Sergei held the power of a god in his hands as he stared uphill at the echoing voices of the American pigs. He was ready to make Tolstoy proud.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO – ACHERON

Storm clouds slowly filled the valley. Ryan watched as the river became a mirror of the concrete sky, framed by the reflection of the black saw-toothed canopy. Sprinkled rain drops rippled across the water's glassy surface. Ryan found his own reflection in the water unbearable to look at; he couldn't meet his own empty eyes. He turned away to face his silent squad. The other men were even more painful for him to watch.

Xavier, the most peaceful man Ryan had ever known, was now wild eyed and frantic, shaking relentlessly on the brink of another panic attack. His M16 bounced in his hands as he stared at the brooding walls of over-hanging trees.

Eli was mute. His eyes were unblinking scratched stones. The flask was in his hands.

Eli shook the flask and felt the bourbon splash cold against the copper in his palms. He was down to a third of what he had left Jericho's base with. His heart leaked from the loss of Logan. He needed to replace what his heart had lost, so he unscrewed the cap of the flask and took a quick swig. He savored the fire in his throat and let out a hot breath; he had long grown numb to the burn. When Eli glanced over his shoulder, he saw that Ryan was silently watching him; judging him, he was sure.

Eli raised the flask.

"For Logan."

Eli tilted the flask and let a stream of amber glug into the river.

Ryan nodded and raised his own canteen, and then Xavier glanced over and did the same with his.

They raised their canteens and flask, muttered "For Logan," took a swig, and poured more out for their fallen friend. They turned their backs to the dark periphery of forest and faced each other with worn, reddened eyes.

Xavier and Eli bowed their heads to the floor. Ryan stared at the approaching storm clouds. There had been a silence over Logan's sacrifice, but the wound had been too fresh to pick.

"He was a hero," Ryan said. His words crackled like dried leaves crushed underfoot. "Logan was always there for us. I don't know where any of us would be if it weren't for him...dead, probably." Xavier nodded shakily.

"He was always watching out for us when we were in the thick of shit... I don't think he cared about himself as much as he cared about us."

"He was selfless," Eli said. "I'm sure he would have sacrificed himself before he let anything happen to Gerald, and even when Gerald was dying..." He shook his head. "I don't think I could have done what Logan did for him."

"When Logan...helped Gerald go, he ended his own life," Ryan said. He thought of McNeil and the other original members of Vulture Squad. He tugged on his mask.

"I'm sure he's glad to be out of this shithole," Xavier mumbled.

"Him and Gerald both."

"I would be," Eli muttered.

They were silent. They listened to the shrill cries of birds and microraptors from the overhanging boughs of fig trees, and the boat's grumbling engine. There was nothing left to say. Xavier and Eli both turned back to the jungle, and Ryan sat down beside Andrei.

Bishop and Ibex were at the bow of the ship. Shadow and Ozzie were leaning against the railing, fighting exhaustion. Ozzie's head was bandaged where he had taken a concussion during the stampede. Ryan watched the haggard faces of the men aboard the boat and he dimly wondered if these moments would be among their final memories.

Logan may have been ready, but was anybody else on the boat prepared for their final passage?

Andrei stirred in his sleep in the seat beside Ryan. His skin shone

sickly white and the withered flesh of his face was being sucked in by his skull. He whimpered from nightmares. Ryan studied him from the corner of his eye. He was sure he had looked the same when he went through withdrawal years ago, after McNeil's death. Even now, Ryan could feel the withdrawal; the fever boiling beneath his skin, the storm brewing in his gut, the sheets of icy sweat on his burning skin. Ryan took a deep breath and rubbed his scarred forearm, uncomfortable with the memory.

"God, make it stop," Andrei hissed, shivering and clutching his sides. "For the love of god, just make it stop."

Ryan nudged Andrei with his elbow and extended his canteen.

"Here, drink this," Ryan said.

Andrei opened his eyes and accepted the canteen from Ryan, desperately gulping.

"It won't be easy, but you can still get through the withdrawal," Ryan said. "Just stay hydrated. When we get back to base, I'll make sure you get three meals a day and bed rest. You'll be okay."

Andrei lowered the canteen and wiped the sheen of sweat from his forehead.

"It hasn't even been a day, and I'm already losing it," Andrei said. "I feel like I'm dying."

"You'll be better for it in the end," Ryan said. "Just tell yourself that if you could survive in a dinosaur-infested jungle in Vietnam, and if you can survive this withdrawal, then you can do anything."

"How would you know that?" Andrei grunted.

"It's because of McNeil," Ryan said. "He was my former captain, back when I first joined Vulture Squad. He..."

Ryan cleared his throat and adjusted the mask on his face.

"He died, years ago. I was badly wounded in the incident that killed him. I spent months in an infirmary on a morphine drip. I lived in that perpetual high. I refused to think. I just wanted to remain in that state of purgatory. I never wanted to escape that freedom from thought. I would have been glad to overdose in my sleep, but I was never brave enough to make it happen."

Andrei watched Ryan. His body was racked with shivering.

"I was released and put back into Vulture Squad," Ryan continued.

"That general you met, Jericho, he saw to it that I would become the new captain of Vulture Squad since I was the only surviving member. He thought he was doing me a favor, but it was unfair. I wasn't ready - I was still addicted. I spent that first month in a

living hell, humping it in the jungle, always throwing up in the heat and humidity. There were days that I wished I would die.”

Ryan shook his head, disgusted with his memories.

“We would be preparing for an attack on a Viet Cong internment camp, and I would be curled in a ball in my tent with a loaded pistol in my mouth. My rookies were terrified. I was terrified. I was the only one who was ready to die.”

Andrei’s respirations began to slow. He stared at Ryan with wide, bloodshot eyes. He pulled his knees into his chest and pulled himself into a sitting position.

“But that wasn’t fair,” Ryan said. “My men didn’t deserve to die because of me, but they did. I had so many men die because I was weak. I remember, one day, when I was ready to pull the trigger, with handfuls of dog tags to send home, I couldn’t take it anymore. I was sick of who I was. McNeil would have been sick with who I had become. I could almost see him watching me from the fog in that jungle, shaking his head.”

Ryan bit his lower lip. His fist was curled around McNeil’s compass in his pocket.

“I didn’t want to be a coward anymore,” Ryan said. “I wanted to make McNeil proud. I wanted to do right by him, or his sacrifice would have been in vain. I had to be a better man. I had to be a better mentor to my men.”

Ryan scratched the scars beneath his mask.

“I still want to be like McNeil. When I saw you, I saw myself back in that jungle. I wish I could have had somebody else to help me bear the burden of guilt and withdrawal, but I was alone - you aren’t. I’m here for you, Andrei, and I want you to be better. I want all of my men to be better.

“I know what this place does. It breaks you. It makes you into something you’re not. People don’t have to be animals; we weren’t meant to live in fear, to be rendered by it. I was able to make a life for myself because of McNeil. I just want to do the same for you.”

Andrei exhaled shakily. “If I wasn’t so afraid, I would have loved my life in that empty research station,” he said. “I would have spent every day of my life studying those majestic dinosaurs and exploring this land. It was a childhood dream come to life, but I was too scared to see it. I let my paranoia turn a beautiful place into a nightmare, and I let that nightmare take over my life.”

Andrei held his head in his hands and closed his eyes.

"I threw away my life, Ryan. I ruined it."

"You'll be okay, Andrei," Ryan said. "We're all being hunted by something. We all want to escape, even if we don't know how. That's how we end up with addictions; we can't find any other way to get away..."

Ryan trailed off and rose from his seat, watching the horizon. Andrei followed Ryan's eyes and saw a cragged boulder towering through the canopy like a mossy pyramid. Ryan quickly faced the bow of the ship and shouted, "Bishop, get us to shore! We're here." "Aye aye, Captain Baker," Bishop replied. He spun the steering wheel, turning the boat towards the shore. They crawled to a stop at the river bank, where a pair of venerable kapok trees stood at the entrance of thick, untamed jungle. Ryan, Xavier, Eli, and Andrei stared at the yawning mouth of wilderness with silent trepidation. Bishop and the black ops team watched Ryan from the bow of the boat.

"It was a pleasure having you, Captain Baker," Bishop said, "But I look forward to seeing you again when we take on the Russians and their collider."

He stepped forward and extended his hand. Ryan accepted Bishop's hand and shook it.

"Thanks for everything, Bishop," Ryan said.

"Good luck finding Miller," Bishop said.

Ryan turned to the squad. "Alright Vultures, double time. Miller's probably expecting us by now, so let's hurry up and get this over with."

Xavier and Andrei climbed over the railing and dropped onto the grassy shore, and Ryan followed. Eli dropped into the knee-high grass beside Ryan and Xavier.

The black ops team saluted Vulture Squad one last time as the boat rotated away from the shore with a grungy snarl. Ryan watched as the boat disappeared around a bend in the river, and he lifted his head to the rapidly darkening sky. Thunder crashed and rain emptied from the heavens.

Ryan glanced over his shoulder at the imposing mouth of the jungle, choked with thickets of foliage and draped in sheets of ivy and vines. The depths beyond the kapok trees were dark with a cyan mist. The shriek of a deinonychus echoed from within the forest.

Ryan hesitated at the gateway to the jungle's dark heart. His fingers

drummed the barrel of his rifle. With a deep breath, he stepped through the Kapok trees and submerged himself into the waist-high ferns. The rest of the squad lingered, listening to the silence that pervaded, and followed Ryan into the dark.

During the long, arduous hike uphill, Eli remained lost in his thoughts. The silence of the jungle weighed him down like gravity, dragging his boots beneath the muddy turf. The animals in the canopy were getting settled into their nests, taking cover from the approaching monsoon.

Everybody in the squad was on edge, scanning their surroundings for any sign of prehistoric carnivores. Xavier twitched with wound up energy and swung his M16 at any sound he heard. Andrei gasped for air against the thick humidity.

The silence always got to Eli. Ever since the massacre on the Han River, it was always the silence that drove him to drink. Whenever there was a period of silence it became audible, ringing in his ears like the echoing screams of his past. In order to break the silence, he would normally crack a joke to his friends and drink their murmured laughter like revitalizing water. When there was no laughter to be had, he would distract himself with the stinging burn of alcohol. It would momentarily blur the memories that would emerge in the void of his mind.

Eli lingered at the rear of the group, shifting the weight of his Ithaca from hand to hand. The silence always brought Eli back to the same memory; back in a village on the river-bank, standing at the lip of a mass grave with Miller at his side. The rain dripped over the edges of their helmets and tapped the muddy ground at their feet.

With the silence sitting on his shoulders and the rain punishing his back, Eli had bent over and helped Miller lift the body of a dead child, a little girl, maybe five or six years old. Eli had been gentle with her cold, swollen ankles, and when he met Miller's shadowy eyes, they looked away in shame. They carefully placed her beside her mother atop the mound of bodies, and Eli reached over and brushed the silken black hair from her eyes and stroked it over her ear.

The mass grave was filled with pale, bloated corpses. Blood seeped from the gunshot and knife wounds that were drawn across the bodies. Eli had leaned back from the little girl and stared over his

and Miller's handiwork with numb disconnection.

Eli swallowed, and he could see the mass grave as clearly before him as the men running beside him. Whenever the silence settled over him, he was transported to that terrible village, standing before that mass grave and the carcasses that Eli and Miller's platoon had filled it with. The rain trickled through the canopy and battered Eli's body, reminding him of the rain that had punished his platoon years ago. Eli never found solace from the silence.

Eli undid the top of his flask and took a drink, bringing the familiar burn to the back of his throat. He drank greedily, hoping to suppress the memories, but when he pulled the flask away, he could still see the pale face of that little girl accusing him with glassy black eyes.

Eli gasped for air and took another pull from the flask, dragging the fire to his heart, incinerating any feeling. When he pulled the flask away, he was crouched at the edge of the mass grave, burying his head into the bloodied mud, and he quickly drank again.

The rest of the squad pushed on, following Ryan through the darkness and bullets of rain. Overhead, thunder boomed and pounded the canopy, stirring the tree tops. Eli winced from it like mortar fire, and he felt the concrete collapsing on him in Hue City. Hue City was a hell in itself. Eli took a long pull from the flask, hoping to disrupt the flow of memories, but they marched on like so many marines he had seen in the floods of fire and lead. The guilt was enough to make him sick, to make him feel distant and disconnected from his body. He felt like he was floating in the air of the storm, a spirit tugged back and forth between the present and his past.

All at once, he was back at the mass grave, looking at the woman and child that he had killed, hearing Miller's shaky voice telling him that it would be okay, that it wasn't his fault, but Eli knew that it was all a lie. He would never forget the Battle of Hue, suffocating in the darkness, crushed by the weight of the eternal oblivion beyond life.

Eli tried to take another drink from the flask, but it was empty. He sighed and tucked the flask away, lifting his Ithaca in its place. His legs churned cement. Blood pumped thick through his veins. His head felt as hollow as his flask, but a hive of hornets buzzed behind his ears and stung the edges of his skull. Eli groaned and put a hand to his temple, squinting against the rain that pecked his eyes like

ravenous scavengers. He fell into step with Andrei's staggering gait. Xavier glanced over his shoulder at Eli and offered him his canteen. "You okay, Eli? You're not looking so good."

Eli brushed past him, stumbling sloppily after Ryan through the foliage.

"No time to talk," Eli said. "We need to find Miller."

"Eli, slow down," Xavier said. "Just drink some water, you'll be okay."

"No, we have to find Miller!" Eli yelled. The pattering rainfall felt deafeningly loud in his ears; the rattle of the jungle filled his head with static. Everybody paused to stare at Eli. Ryan narrowed his eyes at him.

"Eli, are you *drunk*?" Ryan asked.

"Leave me alone, Ryan," Eli shot back. "You're not my fucking mom, and even if you were, I wouldn't let you keep *bitching* at me!"

"Jesus," Ryan said, shaking his head. "I should have known this would happen. Miller's counting on you and you're still shoving your head in that fucking flask."

Ryan's eyes were ablaze. He stood in front of Eli and held his hand out. "Give me the flask, Eli. Let me see how much you've had to drink before I end up dragging you through this jungle."

"Fuck off," Eli spat. "You're wasting time!"

The rain evaporated against Ryan's skin.

"Give. Me. *The flask*."

"You want my flask, you're gonna have to take it from me," Eli sneered. "It was a gift from my Grand Pappy, and I ain't givin' it to a prick like you-"

Ryan grabbed Eli by both shoulders and slammed him against a tree, cracking his head against the rough bark. Eli threw his fists up and shoved Ryan hard, tripping him over a log. Eli lunged, but Ryan kneed him in the stomach, halting his advance. Winded, Eli slumped and hit the soggy earth.

Ryan clambered to his feet, growling, and reached for Eli's throat when a branch snapped several meters away. Everybody paused and glanced in the direction of the sound.

Two sets of human eyes stared back at them from the undergrowth. Everybody was frozen for a few brief seconds, and then Ryan and Eli scrambled to their feet, charging after the fleeing Viet Cong scouts. Ryan shouted over his shoulder, "Non-lethal shots! Non-lethal shots!"

Ryan aimed his CAR-15 at the guerrillas. One of the scouts turned on his heels and opened fire with an AK-47, shredding the foliage at Ryan's feet. Ryan dove away, and Eli and Xavier charged after the Viet Cong scouts, ducking and weaving around the trees for cover. Eli circled a tree and caught one of the scouts in his sights.

Eli wasn't certain if it was the alcohol or his own boiling anger, but he found the Viet Cong's frightened face in front of his Ithaca and he pulled the trigger. With a powerful *thoom*, the Viet Cong's head erupted like a fleshy melon.

The other Viet Cong scout scampered off through the foliage, vanishing into the depths of the jungle. Eli came to stop at the dead body and panted, holding the smoking Ithaca tight in hand.

When Ryan came to Eli's side, his chest was heaving with animalistic rage. His jaw cracked painfully from grinding his teeth. Ryan shoved Eli and shouted, "What the hell was that, Eli? I told you non-lethal shots! If you didn't kill him, we could have gotten information from him! Why can't you do a damned thing I tell you?!"

"Fuck off, Mom," Eli grunted.

Ryan opened his mouth to speak, but Xavier yelled, "I found his trail!"

Ryan and Eli both turned away from the dead body and saw Xavier crouched beside some crushed foliage, his M16 in hand.

"I found his trail, guys," Xavier said. "If we follow it, we can find where the rest of the Viet Cong are, and maybe we can find Miller."

Ryan stared at Eli coldly.

"You better pray to god he didn't escape."

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE– ESCAPE

Thunder crashed throughout the valley and Miller awoke with a startled gasp. The detonating rockets in his nightmares of Hue City had synced with the rising storm. Pellets of rain rattled through the canopy and doused the fire at the center of the clearing. Apparitions were released from the smoldering pit. Miller watched as the phantoms fled and sank back in his cage. His body throbbed and ached; it was the only thing that assured him he was still alive.

The Viet Cong guerrillas raced around the muddy clearing, shouting and gathering their weapons. Half of the men ran into the rising mist of the jungle while the other half stayed behind with Con Nhen.

Con Nhen slurred in Vietnamese at a pair of brutish guerillas and stabbed his finger in Miller's direction. His eyes narrowed at Miller, venomous and red.

Miller coughed. "What's going on, Nguyen?"

Nguyen squinted. His wet black bangs were draped over his eyes. He brushed them aside.

"A scout returned from the jungle. He saw Americans," Nguyen said. "Half of the Viet Cong are going to intercept the Americans while the others stay here to wait and see what happens. They're going to hide in the jungle and ambush the Americans if they end up finding this camp. Con Nhen is telling those two Viet Cong to take us away and keep us quiet."

Miller nodded. He chewed on his lower lip. The reintroduction of pain made the gears in his skull click and whirr into action. He chewed until he tasted fresh blood, but his mind remained empty. "What do we do?" Nguyen asked. "Do we run? Do you think we can make it?"

"No," Miller said. "We have to fight."

"How? We don't have anything to fight with," Nguyen said.

Miller spat red like he was chewing tobacco. He was serene in the sound of the rain. The silence brought him peace. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt silence so soft in his ears. There had always been memories to disrupt the silence, but now he welcomed the accusing eyes that stared from within. He wanted their judgment. He needed it to survive.

"Don't worry about it," Miller said. He stared at the approaching pair of Viet Cong and spat again. "I'll take care of it. Just run the first chance you get find Vulture Squad. You'll be okay."

The two guerillas stopped in front of their cages. One man held Miller's M16; the other held an AK-47. Miller stared through the piercing gaze of the guerilla with the M16. The guerilla swore and kicked the bars of the cage. Miller didn't blink.

The guard with the AK-47 aimed his rifle between Miller's eyes while the second guard bent to unlock the cage. Miller ground his teeth. His eyes ran up the length of the man's twig-like fingers, up his ragged sleeves, to the hilt of a blade poking from the man's belt. Miller's heart leapt and adrenaline brought his diluted senses back to life.

The door to Miller's cage swung open, and the guard reached for his throat. Miller felt the tension coiling his limbs, the new-found

energy, and he threw himself into the guard's legs. The guard laughed and threw an elbow into Miller's neck. The pinched nerve in Miller's neck seized, and he collapsed at the guard's feet. The guard dragged Miller out by the scruff of his neck and tossed him fac-down in the mud. The guard lowered the barrel of the M16 to his temple. Miller flinched away like the touch of the rifle was toxic. The guard with the AK-47 turned his back to Miller and stooped down to unlock Nguyen's cage.

Nguyen glanced at Miller. Desperation welled in his eyes. Miller kept a stony face and twitched his head at the guard with the AK-47. Nguyen followed Miller's eyes from the guard, down to the mud at the edge of his cage, then back to the guard again. Nguyen looked at Miller and nodded quickly.

Nguyen looked at the guard, but he couldn't meet the man's eyes. He reached through the bars of his cage, scooped a handful of mud, and flung it into guard's face.

The man growled and furiously wiped his eyes. The other guard with the M16 barked at Nguyen in Vietnamese. Nguyen tried to keep a blank face; he didn't want to show any fear.

The guard with the AK-47 smeared the mud from his eyes and aimed the rifle at Nguyen, his finger on the trigger.

Miller sprang to his feet. In one fluid motion, he pushed the M16 into the air and pulled the dagger from the guard's belt. He slammed the blade into the guard's knee cap and kicked him over. Before the screaming man hit the ground, Miller ripped the M16 out of the man's hands and shot the second guard in the jaw, spinning him like a top.

Miller dropped behind a crate and fired at the Viet Cong guerillas gathered with Con Nhen across the camp. The men dove out of the way and ducked behind the crates and oil drums that were littered throughout the clearing.

The guard at Miller's feet was still screaming, so Miller lowered the M16 and silenced him with a single shot. Nguyen was busy tugging apart the dead guard's clenched fingers to get the key for his cage. Automatic fire tore through the campsite, drowning out the roar of the rain. The corner of Miller's crate was quickly shattered and splintered. Miller swung the M16 around the crate and fired a round at a guerrilla, punching a hole through the man's sternum. Another Viet Cong rose from behind an oil drum and opened fire. Miller ducked and a spray of splinters scratched the back of his

neck. His heart was pounding and his thoughts were racing, but he was free and he had a gun, and that was all that mattered.

Nguyen found the key to his cage and twisted it into the padlock.

The heavy padlock clicked open and hit the ground with a *thud*.

Nguyen threw himself at his cage door and tumbled out, sprawling atop the dead guard behind Miller.

Miller glanced at Nguyen from the corner of his eye just as a Viet Cong popped up from the other side of the crate. An AK-47 was aimed at the back of Miller's head. Nguyen saw the man's eyes pinched shut, the mouth stretched wide in a violent scream.

Nguyen felt a dagger beneath his hand and he whipped it over his head without thinking.

Miller ducked and the dagger *whacked* into the Viet Cong's throat, knocking him backwards off of his feet. Nguyen panted breathlessly and stared at the empty air where the Viet Cong had been.

Everything was still for a brief few seconds. Miller raised his eyebrows at Nguyen and glanced over his shoulder across the clearing. The air was quickly punctuated by return-fire.

Miller ducked as bullets snapped overhead. Nguyen was still staring at the empty air, oblivious to the bullets whipping past. Miller reached back and pulled him to the soaked mud. The crate shuddered with the impact of gunshots, and Miller winced against the vibrations coursing through his shoulder. With a deep breath, he burst out from behind the crate and charged through the torrential downpour towards cover.

The two remaining Viet Cong guerillas followed Miller's path with their AK-47s, drumming the thick mud with lead in his wake.

Miller's boots slipped and he slid through the mud on his chest. He came to a stop a foot away from a crate and frantically crawled for cover while bullets coursed through the air. His heart hammered relentlessly, and he was cold from the frigid air, but he felt more alive than he ever had. The M16 was hot in his hands, and the rain pecked at his back like scavenging birds.

Miller took a deep breath and spun around the crate, opening fire on a Viet Cong peering from behind an oil drum. The burst of shots tore the man's face into a shapeless mask of frayed skin and pulped flesh. Miller had seen, and done, worse. He hardly blinked.

The second Viet Cong emerged from behind a crate and opened fire, spraying wildly from the hip. Miller pulled away and swung around the opposite corner of his crate. He returned fire, pulverizing the

Viet Cong's legs. The man's legs shook and danced with each impact, bouncing and rippling unnaturally, until he collapsed. The man screamed and clutched the ragged flesh beneath his tattered cloth pants. Miller ran around the crate and fired three more rounds, pounding the Viet Cong's chest into hamburger and splintered bone.

The rain buzzed around Miller's head like a cloud of locusts. Miller was so high on adrenaline that he felt like he was being lifted off of the ground by it. He was dizzy and nauseous. He sprinted through the camp, slapping the thick mud beneath his boots, waving the M16 from side to side.

Miller glanced over his shoulder at the empty cages.

"Nguyen, are you okay?" he shouted. "They're all gone, you can come out now."

Nguyen's head rose above the crate, and he stared at Miller. His eyes were huge and white against his slick, tan face.

"The Viet Cong that I stabbed...he isn't dead..." Nguyen said. "What do I do?"

Miller stared back at Nguyen through the haze of the downpour, squinting against the droplets that filled the rims of his sunken eyes. He listened as the rain shook the canopy and pelted the earth. He could hear the soft moan of the wounded man from across the camp.

"Put him out of his misery," Miller said.

Nguyen stared at Miller, then back to the man lying at his feet. "I'm sorry," Nguyen said.

Miller faced the dripping mouth of the torture shack. The open doorway revealed abysmal darkness. Miller swallowed and took cautious steps toward the tomb he had been dragged from. Hatred filled Miller's body like fire; it propelled him. Miller was going to kill that goddamned devil, and he was going to escape this hell. The yawning doorway loomed a meter away. Miller took a deep breath and squeezed the grip of his M16. He imagined Con Nhen was hiding somewhere in the shadows like a coward, too scared to actually fight like a man.

The rain drummed like hundreds of frigid fingertips against Miller's bare shoulders. They were the ghosts of his past, urging him on to the darkness. They were pushing him towards a final conflict, to meet the evil he had been destined to face. He had seen the devil

inside of himself and he expected to see it when he met his final judgment.

Miller stepped through the rain that streaked across the doorway and entered the damp, cold darkness of the shack. He swung the M16 from left to right and peered into the shadows. Rain dripped through the thatched ceiling and pattered onto the soggy floor. Miller strained to hear. He waited for a few seconds, smelling the mildew and mold in the air, the copper stench of blood. There were teeth and fingernails scattered in the darkness, as well as the tools that Con Nhen had used to pull them. Miller tightened his jaw. "I know you're in here," Miller said. His dry, rasping voice burned through the shadows. "I know you've been waiting for me. Come out and confess your sins."

For a few seconds, there was only the silence and rainfall. And then, from the darkness, Miller heard a hissing growl that slowly built into cackling laughter. Miller raised his M16 and aimed it at the source of the sound, but it shifted shapelessly through the shadows, blurring around him, circling.

Miller spun and caught a glimpse of teeth shining dully like fangs, bloody eyes pierced by dark pupils, and the flash of a hammer reflecting the scant light as it swung through the air. The M16 was knocked out of Miller's hands and the hammer head cracked into his cheek bone. His head twisted and he collapsed with a howl of pain.

Con Nhen emerged from the shadows and plunged the Ka-Bar blade deep into Miller's shoulder. Miller fell to his knees, screaming, and twisted away. Con Nhen descended on him like a wild animal, swinging the hammer into Miller's ribs and shoulders.

Miller buckled beneath the barrage and tried to pull away from the Ka-Bar blade. Con Nhen drove it deeper, scraping the bones in Miller's shoulder.

"You demon, GI!" Con Nhen screamed, "You demon, you pay for your sins, you pay for what you've done! You pay, GI; you pay with your life!"

Con Nhen twisted the Ka-Bar, drilling the tip into Miller's shoulder blade. Miller howled and threw his elbow into the side of Con Nhen's head. Miller felt fire burst through his back as the Ka-Bar ripped out of his shoulder. He tried to climb to his feet, but Con Nhen tackled him into the dirt with a deranged snarl.

Miller threw his elbow and caught Con Nhen in the gut, then in the

sternum, but Con Nhen couldn't be bucked. Con Nhen raised the Ka-Bar high above his head and plunged it into the flesh of Miller's back.

Miller screamed as he felt the Ka-Bar slice down the length of his spine. Blood washed his clammy skin, spilling to the dirt floor. Con Nhen shrieked at Miller and shoved his face into the dirt, rubbing his nose in the slurried filth and blood.

Miller felt his blood drain like hot water from a faucet. His body became hollow and numb. His vision faded. He thought of Eli fighting against the weight of concrete slabs in Hue City, being crushed by an unstoppable force, and he fought with his last reserve of strength.

Miller roared and slammed the meat of his fist into Con Nhen's bony jaw. Con Nhen fell off of Miller and scrambled away, towards the open door. Miller tackled Con Nhen into the bamboo wall and Con Nhen screeched, swinging the Ka-Bar. Miller grabbed the knife by the handle and pulled it out of Con Nhen's hands. Con Nhen screamed and pulled back, tearing the rosary away from the blade. The rosary broke and scarlet beads filled the air; they bounced across the floor and rolled through Miller's pooled blood. Con Nhen clawed at Miller's face and jabbed his thumb into Miller's eye, forcing him to drop the Ka-Bar with a cry of pain.

Miller threw his fist into Con Nhen's nose and it crunched like glass beneath his knuckles. Con Nhen shrieked and Miller threw him to the ground. Con Nhen tried to scramble away, but Miller dropped his knees into the small of his back, pinning him.

Miller fought to stay on top of Con Nhen, straddling his chest while Con Nhen squirmed and wildly jabbed at Miller with his fists. Miller was dizzy and cold, and he couldn't concentrate. He was tired of fighting, tired of the cold rain, the jungle, the darkness; tired of Vietnam.

Miller bellowed and dropped his elbow into Con Nhen's throat, bending the windpipe. Con Nhen screamed and choked, but he was still breathing. It was a battle for Miller to sit up-right, and when he did he felt the blood spill out of his back in a hot sheet, spattering onto the floor. The room was fading away, and Con Nhen was still squirming, still struggling like a dying serpent to stay alive.

Miller howled and fell onto Con Nhen like a brick wall. He jammed his elbow between the discs in Con Nhen's throat, and the windpipe collapsed. Con Nhen choked breathlessly and clawed at his own

neck, gasping like a dying fish.

Miller stared down at Con Nhen, into his desperate, pleading red eyes, and he spat into the dirt. It took time to die of a collapsed windpipe; plenty of time for Con Nhen to suffer.

When Miller pulled away from Con Nhen, he immediately collapsed into a pool of his own blood. The beads of his broken rosary were scattered around him. Miller was losing the feeling in his feet, and the numbness was creeping up his legs like ice water. He was no longer in pain; he was cold and tired. He pushed himself up on violently trembling arms and bowed his head, pulling in a long breath.

Con Nhen choked and spasmed on the floor beside him. The silence was filled with rainfall, and Miller vaguely wondered if Eli was listening to the same silence.

Miller opened his eyes and saw his reflection blurred and distorted in the burgundy puddle. He was looking through a window, staring through the eyes of another human being. He was seeing himself through the eyes of a little girl in a mass grave, laid to rest beside her mother.

Miller was staring through her eyes, the glassy eyes of a baby doll, at himself. He was crouched at the lip of a mass grave as rain pounded his back; punishment for his atrocity.

Every time Miller looked into a mirror, he saw his face at that moment, the weight of his atrocities distorting his face into a mask of thoughtless, apathetic pain. He was a murderer; he killed innocent civilians in cold blood. He killed a woman and her child, and he was gentle with their icy, swollen limbs as he and Eli lowered them into a mass grave. Eli had promised him that everything would be okay, that they were only following orders. Miller crawled across the blood-soaked floor and felt the beads of the rosary beneath his palms and outstretched fingers. He probed the darkness, sensing without seeing, for his Ka-Bar. The rain became monotonous white noise.

Miller took dwindling, shallow breaths. His fingers ran over slippery beads, hot blood, and damp earth, until he felt the handle of the Ka-Bar. He held it against his chest with a sigh of relief. As long as he had the Ka-Bar, he would be safe. It was all that he needed to survive Vietnam.

Miller found his M16 and used it as a cane to push himself back up to his feet. His legs trembled like an old man's, but he managed to

walk without falling. He stood at the doorway and took a deep breath. Fresh, cool air replenished his lungs. The rain was a peaceful, placid drone. Faint light found its way through the canopy and gave the low-lying mist that rippled and flurried across the ground a golden hue.

Miller felt the Ka-Bar in his hands and glanced over his shoulder at Con Nhen, whom spasmed and gagged on the ground. Miller turned the Ka-Bar over in his hand and found the crucifix of his rosary still tied to the hilt of the blade. With careful, trembling hands, Miller plucked off the little silver crucifix and held it tightly.

"Here," Miller grunted. He tossed the Ka Bar to Con Nhen and it hit the dirt with a soft *thud*. Con Nhen glanced at the blade and back to Miller, whom stared coldly.

"You need it more than me," Miller said, and he stepped out of the darkness and into the rain.

Nguyen stared silently at the suffering Viet Cong stretched out before him. The biting drops of rain didn't faze him, nor did the cold or the roar of the thunder. He had the AK-47 in his hands, but he couldn't think of how to use it. It was dead weight. He felt like a child, helplessly watching the blood drain from between the Viet Cong's clutching fingers.

The dagger's handle bobbed every time the man drew a breath. The man grunted and gasped. Blood spilled from his lips and painted red stripes down his chin. His eyes were huge and wet, pleading wordlessly at Nguyen. Nguyen stared back, devoid of thought. All of the years of anger and hatred that Nguyen had felt towards the Viet Cong was draining from his body. He was hollow and weak. He had grown to know the Viet Cong as faceless monsters, demons of the night that came and stole the lives of his friends and family.

This man splayed out before him; he wasn't Viet Cong anymore. He was young, with lightly tanned skin and almond eyes. His hair was cropped short and smeared with mud. When the young man opened his mouth to choke on air, Nguyen could see that he had nearly-perfect teeth.

The young man reached out to Nguyen with a bloody palm and tried to hold his shoulder. Nguyen remained frozen despite his urge to flee.

This young man could have been anybody. He could have been a local villager, or he could have been a doctor from Saigon. He slept

beneath the same moon as Nguyen, and he awoke to the same sun and sky. He could have been Nguyen's best friend, or even one of his deceased brothers.

This dying boy wasn't the Viet Cong that had appeared in Nguyen's night terrors, nor was it the Viet Cong that Nguyen had always imagined himself killing whenever he practiced shooting with the black ops team. This young man wasn't his imagined monster; he was a human, another native son of Vietnam. He very well could have been Nguyen.

The AK-47 was cold and heavy in Nguyen's hands. It was slithering out of his grasp, slick with the rain water. The young man's touch was warm on Nguyen's shoulder, and he could feel the tickle of energy pass through his skin. Nguyen leaned closer to the man, not quite comprehending.

Tears filled Nguyen's eyes and rolled down his cheeks. The young man's hand ran up the length of Nguyen's shoulder, clasped his neck, and finally cupped his face. Nguyen stared into the young man's eyes, and he stared back as they listened to the rain fill the world.

Nguyen squeezed the AK-47 and lifted it for the young man to see. The young man glanced at it. He met Nguyen's eyes and nodded weakly. His hand seemed glued to Nguyen's face by the sticky blood, and warmth radiated through his fingertips. The warmth filled Nguyen; it made him falter and choke as it mixed with the bitter cold in his gut.

Nguyen struggled to see the young man through the distorted lens of his tears. Nguyen held his breath and raised the AK-47. The young man continued to nod. His eyes faintly glimmered with comprehension. The jungle held its breath and the storm howled mournfully. The AK-47 weighed as much as a guillotine blade in Nguyen's hands.

The AK-47 cracked and bucked into Nguyen's shoulder, pushing him away. The young man's hand peeled off of Nguyen's face and wilted to the ground. A halo of blood was created around the man's head, dappled by each drop of rain until it became mired with the mud. The glimmer was gone from the young man's eyes. His body was as still as a stone as it sank back into the earth.

Nguyen dropped the AK-47 and held his head in his hands. His fingers were trembling, and he felt nauseous. The cold air slowly erased any lingering warmth of the young man's touch. A gentle

moan rose in Nguyen's throat, like that of an injured animal. He didn't notice Miller standing beside him.

"It's never easy the first time."

Nguyen glanced over his shoulder and saw Miller leaning against his M16. He looked like an old man, hunched over and worn with scars like wrinkles. Miller's eyes were tired and understanding. Nguyen choked and wiped the tears from his face. He opened his mouth to speak, but only a strangled cry filtered out. Miller raised a hand to silence him.

"It's never easy the first time," Miller said slowly. "And it never gets any easier. When you join a war, you need to understand why you're fighting..."

Miller shook his head. "Don't be like me. You have to know why you're fighting. If you don't, you'll be taking lives out of fear, or for hate, or even worse; for nothing at all..."

Miller took a hobbling step forward and crumpled to the mud.

"Miller!" Nguyen cried. He leapt to his feet and ran to Miller's side. He nearly recoiled when he saw the wound running along Miller's spine. Nguyen hooked his arms underneath of Miller's armpits and tried to lift him.

"Jesus, Miller, Jesus, we've got to get you out of here," Nguyen said. "We've got to find your squad and get you to the infirmary."

"Calm down, Nguyen," Miller coughed. He pulled away from Nguyen and dropped heavily onto a crate, panting. He coughed wetly into his shoulder. He sat upright and stared into Nguyen's eyes.

"I've got a mission for you," Miller said. He held a crumpled wad of paper out of his pocket and extended it to Nguyen. Hesitantly, Nguyen curled his fingers around the damp wad.

"What is this?" Nguyen asked.

"It's a map," Miller said. "I took it from Con Nhen's shack. The coordinates to the Russian Compound are on it. I think these oil drums were the shipments Jericho was telling us about. The fish-faced fuckers were dumping this South of the DMZ. I'm going to stay and destroy them; you take that map and find my squad. Give it to Eli, and tell him..."

Miller chewed on his lip, suddenly hesitant.

"Tell him I'm sorry for what I did. Tell him that I'm thankful I walked through hell and back with him. If he could make it through Hue City, he can make it through anything."

"You can still make it," Nguyen pleaded.

"No, Nguyen, I can't," Miller sighed. "If you don't get out of here, this is all going to go to waste. So beat it, alright? Vulture Squad needs you right now. Find them before the rest of the Viet Cong do."

Nguyen nodded shakily and slipped the map into his pocket. Miller handed him the M16 and pointed towards the mist lingering beneath the canopy. Nguyen watched the forest with wide eyes and turned back to Miller, shaking his head in disbelief.

"You can do it, Nguyen," Miller said. "I believe in you."

Nguyen nodded and turned to leave, but he hesitated. He turned and hugged Miller tightly.

"Thank you, Miller," Nguyen said. "I won't let you down."

Miller gave Nguyen a pat on the back and waved him away.

Nguyen gave Miller a final salute before charging into the depths of the jungle.

Miller watched as Nguyen dissipated into the fog and sighed solemnly. With shaking arms, he pushed himself upright and lifted a belt of grenades from one of the dead guerrillas.

Miller squeezed a grenade's handle and hooked his finger into the pin. He lifted his head to the canopy. The rain dripped through the tree tops and streaked through the air like ribbons of glass.

The rain chilled Miller's skin and kissed his wounds. The sad song of a hornbill drifted through the air and several others joined in a chorus around the camp. Miller was amazed at how peaceful the jungle was without the influence of man. Without the chaotic violence, it was almost beautiful. The music of the jungle was lush without the screaming gunshots. Miller finally felt no fear.

Miller always knew that he would never escape the Vietnam War. Even if someday he was back in the United States, sitting in a movie theater or playing baseball with friends, or starting a family with his wife, he would always be in the jungle, in Hue City, or on the Han River, staring at the face of his crimes.

Whatever life Miller had expected to live was a dream imagined by a soldier forever lost in conflict, drifting from village to village on a boat towards an intangible destination, trapped in transition. His reality would always be Vietnam.

Miller pulled the pin on the grenade and tossed it across the camp, then another, and another after that. He quickly pulled the pin on each grenade and tossed it at an oil drum until he only had one left,

which he held tightly against his chest. He shut his eyes and prayed. "Lord, please let me meet my Dad, and please let me see my Uncle Charlie and Grandma and Grandpa and Aunt Katie, and please keep Eli safe. Please help him with the things that I couldn't have helped, and please help him with the guilt, help him bear the load before it crushes---"

The first grenade erupted with a flash of fire. An oil drum exploded with a scream; a billowing fireball spread like the wings of a reborn phoenix and shards of metal whizzed past Miller's face. Heat rushed against his skin. Miller pulled the pin of his final grenade and spoke more urgently.

"Please, god, help Nguyen make it to Ryan and the others, and please help them with their mission. Please help them stop the Russians, and please help them to survive, and please let me see Gerald when I go, I want to see him again, I know I wasn't as good as him but I tried, god, I really tried to be as good as Gerald, so please--"

The second and third grenades erupted, blowing apart the earth. The resulting explosions from the oil drums created a ring of fire around Miller. He opened his eyes and saw an immolated dragon circling him. He could see the scales of smoke, the fiery fangs and jaws rushing towards him.

He saw the little girl and her mother in the flames.

Miller's eyes shot open as the seams of being were unraveled.

"Please," Miller begged, "Please, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, god, please! I never meant to hurt you! I never meant to do this to you! Please, forgive me, I'm so sorry I haven't said it sooner, ladies, please, I'm sorry!"

The grenade in Miller's hands swelled.

"I'm sor--"

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR – SILENCE

The jungle thickened around Vulture Squad as they raced after the fleeing Viet Cong scout. A web of vines snaked through the canopy, hanging low to tangle the undergrowth. Ivy was strung from every branch, and moss draped the thick roots of colossal banyan trees. The air was ripe with the smell of rotten leaf litter.

The Viet Cong's trail narrowed; the squad had to run single file through the biting palms and thorn shrubs. Xavier paused, checked the Viet Cong's tracks, and continued to lead the squad through the

thicket. The growing winds of the storm occupied the silence of the group.

Thunder boomed, and Eli instinctively ducked. He had an instantaneous flashback of his tomb of concrete and mortar in Hue City. He could still feel the crushing weight, the dark silence as he waited for death. His life had never been the same since he had discovered that oblivion.

In the abysmal void behind his closed eyes, where the only signs of life were his thoughts swimming through shadows, Eli had learned what lied beyond death. If Miller hadn't dragged him out, Eli would have slipped into that vast emptiness beyond the sights and sounds of reality.

Eli felt Ryan's eyes on his back like he did the ivy that tangled his feet. The air between them was as cold as the rain stinging their bare skin, but Eli didn't care. He didn't care what Ryan thought of him, and he didn't care about being a member of Vulture Squad. If Eli and Miller hadn't joined Vulture Squad, they would have never discovered this hell hole.

It seemed like every mistake Eli and Miller had made had carried them along like the rivers of Vietnam, towards an intangible place that Eli feared to face.

Further ahead, Xavier suddenly stopped and looked around with his M16. He stood beyond a net of dripping-wet vines. Ryan shouldered past Eli and went to Xavier's side.

Eli trembled with nervous energy. His muscles tightened and he licked his lips. His head was swimming with the adrenaline and bourbon. Ryan and Xavier were muttering lowly while staring at something at their feet. Andrei staggered up to Eli, panting profusely.

"What are they looking at?" Andrei wheezed.

"I don't know, but it probably don't matter," Eli murmured. He pushed through the vines and stood beside Ryan.

Ryan put a finger in front of his mask before Eli could speak. Eli followed Ryan's eyes to the forest floor where Xavier was crouched. Eli covered his mouth and gagged from the familiar odor.

What remained of the Viet Cong scout they had been following was strewn beneath the broad leaves of a banana tree. The carnage was fresh; blood steamed beneath the cold rain shower. An eyeball stared at Eli from pulped gore. Slivers of bone glistened in the crimson puddles.

Eli trembled as he studied the viscera. He held his Ithaca and stared at the hovering white wall of mist uphill. His muscles tensed for a sprint into the unknown. He knew that Miller was lost somewhere in the void.

Xavier pulled a feather from the mutilated tissue and held it up for Ryan to see. The green and brown striations were visible through the sticky crimson.

“Utahraptors,” Ryan muttered.

Lightning cracked like a gunshot, and Eli winced. The echoing scream rung through his ears, but the silence that followed was louder. He remembered the echo of Logan’s pistol, and the silence that had followed. He thought of how he would find Miller, of the condition that he might be in. The things that he had seen the Viet Cong do to people...the things that he himself had done to Vietnamese men while trying to find Viet Cong along the Han River. Eli knew of the atrocities that men could commit. Eli didn’t want to think of what he might have to do when he found Miller. It made his eyes water to think of the echoing report of Logan’s pistol in the silence of these haunted jungles.

Eli stumbled past Ryan and started moving further uphill.

“Eli, slow down,” Xavier said, rising to his feet. “We need to make sure we aren’t walking into an ambush.”

“You think they’re smart enough to ambush us?” Ryan asked.

“They are,” Andrei spoke up. “And they will.”

Eli pushed through the foliage until he tripped and fell. Ryan and Xavier watched as he climbed back to his feet. There was blood smeared across his chest, hands, and face. Ryan’s eyes widened. Eli looked at his clothes and then at Ryan with a look of panicked disgust.

“I found another Charlie,” Eli said.

Ryan, Xavier, and Andrei pushed their way through the foliage to Eli. When they looked to his feet, they saw a severed head with a skeletal tail of vertebrae between his boots. Ribbons of muscular tissue decorated the forest floor. Trailing organs were smeared through the mud.

Ryan followed the trail of desecrated flesh with his eyes to the source, and his jaw fell open. Ice flowed through his veins. He listened to the surrounding jungle, shivering and shaking beneath the storm.

Viet Cong bodies in various states of dismemberment were scattered

throughout the forest. Rain rolled over their ragged limbs and shattered bones. The undergrowth was coated in a red sheen. It was impossible to count how many bodies there had originally been. Ryan dug his fingers into the scars beneath his mask and turned on his heel. His eyes shone like moons in dark sockets. "We can't stay here," Ryan said. "We find Miller and we get out; we can't afford to spend any more time here than we have to. Understood?"

Eli shook his head.

"No way, we have to find him, no matter what."

The hilltop suddenly erupted like a volcano, pluming fire and smoke through the canopy. The trees bowed away from the explosion and scorching winds roared downhill. Clouds of smoke rolled through the forest.

Eli ducked as hot air rushed over him. Andrei screamed from behind a tree. The roaring explosion tore through their ear drums. A black fog of noxious smoke hung in the air.

Ryan jumped to his feet and peered through the darkness over the end of his rifle. Eli staggered to his feet and stared at the smoldering remains of the hilltop.

"*M-Miller?*"

"Eli, get our six," Ryan said. He took a few plaintive steps into the murky abyss. He could see the dull flicker of flames at the rim of the hilltop, and the intense glow of a fire raging beyond. The ringing was still in his ears, growing louder and louder, like a descending mortar.

Ryan's eyes shot wide open.

"Take cover!" Ryan shouted.

Ryan dove and rolled away as the burning shard of an oil drum sliced through the smoke and speared into the undergrowth.

Everybody scrambled for cover as countless metal shards whistled through the smoke and struck the soil like flaming arrowheads.

As soon as the hail of immolated metal subsided, Eli burst through the foliage and charged uphill. The smoke burned in his eyes and the soot stained his skin black. He screamed Miller's name as he strode through the clouds of smoke, past the smoldering remains of the oil drums that tumbled through the canopy. Ryan yelled and raced after Eli through the darkness with Xavier in tow.

Eli staggered through the charred foliage until he saw a silhouette stumbling downhill. Eli's face lit up and he cheered. Relief crashed

into his body in chilling waves.

The dark shape of a man stumbled weakly towards Eli, an M16 in hand.

“Miller!”

The rain smeared the soot into black paint across Eli's face. He smiled at Miller and extended his arms to catch his friend. The shadow stumbled closer. The darkness of the smoke was thick between them, but Eli could make out Miller's shaved head, the whites of his eyes. The veil of smoke dissipated the closer they came. Eli's smile slowly descended to a horrified grimace.

"Thank god," Nguyen said, nearly collapsing at Eli's feet. "Thank god you're here, I thought I was dead! Oh, thank god!"

"No, no, no," Eli chanted with rising panic. He shoved past Nguyen and sprinted uphill, towards the burning hilltop. Ryan and Xavier caught Nguyen before he crumpled to the ground. Ryan looked past Nguyen and shouted after Eli, but the only response was the whispering of sated flames.

Eli continued to sprint. His boots slid through the mud and burning vegetation. He choked against the smoke and stumbled around the edges of fire, towards the burning pillars of tree trunks that rimmed the Viet Cong camp. Ryan was still shouting Eli's name, but there was no stopping him. The fire roared in Eli's face, and the rain hissed in his ears.

On the other side of the fire was Eli's and Miller's final destination, the end of their perilous journey through Vietnam together, their intertwined fates. Eli's heartbeat drummed in his chest, and he dove through the veil of fire into what remained of the Viet Cong camp. Eli rolled through hot, burning ash and he yowled in pain. He clawed through the embers and scrambled to his feet, frantically rubbing the soot from his eyes. He spun around, slack-jawed with eyes glowing in the light of the fire.

The Viet Cong camp had been reduced to a smoldering pit of ash, pulsating with radioactive heat. The air was thick with smoke, illuminated faintly by the remnants of the fire that traced the edges of the clearing. Eli scanned back and forth, spinning on his heel.

"Miller!"

Eli coughed hoarsely, choking on the noxious smoke.

"Miller, where are you!?"

Eli stumbled blindly through the haze, side-stepping the red-hot shards of bone half-buried in the muck. The rain mixed the soot into a boiling black sludge. Eli walked along the edge of the camp and scanned the shadows for any sign of life. His throat was dry and cracked, and his eyes burned intensely.

When Eli reached the end of his circle, he collapsed to his knees and sank into the filthy sludge. He desperately pawed through the black muck, feeling for fingers or a boot, but his hands came up empty. Panting beneath the smoke, he lifted his head and saw a massive hole ripped through the dark canopy, revealing a wide halo of pale white sky churning with oil-black smoke.

Eli's head dropped. He tried to say Miller's name, but he couldn't speak. He rasped the word out painfully, grating the inside of his throat. It came out as a ragged whisper.

"M-Miller?"

Eli sank head-first into the sludge. He held his head in his hands and repeated Miller's name over and over in a sobbing chant, rising in volume with his mounting horror. The world became mute as his head submerged beneath the slurry. He was blind, deaf, and howling into the abyss. The rain stung his backside like hypodermic needles. He continued to scream into the void as Ryan and Xavier struggled to drag him out.

When Eli was pulled out of the filth, it was rebirth. He listened to the staccato of the rain, the hiss of the embers being extinguished. Eli stared dumbly at the glowing halo of the sky, the tempest slowly wrapping around the eye of the storm. He sobbed drunkenly. He wanted to pray, but no words came to him. He wanted to scream Miller's name, but he knew he would never hear his friend respond. A quivering cry rose in Eli's throat, and he fell back into Ryan's arms as the silence swathed him.

Eli went limp in Ryan's arms, defeated. He had lost the race to save his best friend from the eternal silence. He lifted his head to the suffocated light being swallowed by the storm as he was dragged back into the darkness of the jungle.

Tears trickled listlessly down Eli's filthy, trembling face. He moaned meekly as the shadows engulfed him beneath the canopy. He didn't fight back. He allowed himself to drown in his loss.

The silence was his companion now.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE – GOD SAVES NONE

Sergei was crouched beneath the foliage at the edge of Jericho's base, listening to the orchestra of the storm. He could feel the thunder beating in his chest, the lightning snapping through his veins. His body was painted with mud and half-dried blood. Frigid rain dripped over his frozen figure. The monsoon provided the perfect cover for his rescue mission. The hunt was on for the primitive sapien.

On the other side of the foliage, a dozen army rangers kept their heads bowed to the crashing walls of water. They had been flown in overnight to provide additional security for Jericho's base, and Sergei had been studying them for hours. He was currently focused on a pair of soldiers that were circling the perimeter in opposing directions. Sergei watched as one of the soldiers drew near. His fingers tingled as he squeezed the hilt of the machete.

The jungle roared in Sergei's head. He felt the animal instincts within himself, the nature of savagery that had lied dormant in his heart. Sergei was a predator waiting to ambush his prey. The soldier he was watching had his head bowed to the storm, only occasionally glancing at the surrounding forest.

Sergei saw the other sentry, on the other end of the perimeter, vanish from sight behind a building. His eyes widened. Now was his time to strike. The rest of the rangers were cowering from the storm. Nothing would stop Sergei. The storm swelled in his chest, and he felt the tide of Vietnam's black rivers coursing through his veins.

Sergei watched as the sentry slowly walked past. The man seemed hesitant; perhaps he could sense he was being watched. Sergei watched as the man peered into the foliage, M16 at the ready. Sergei sank lower to the ground. He watched as the man frowned and turned back to face the camp.

There was flash of lightning, and Sergei was propelled to his feet. The machete flowed through the air like a feather. He grabbed the sentry by the neck, covered his mouth, and swiped the blade through his throat. The man didn't even have time to react. Hot blood ran down Sergei's hands like a swarm of insects. The young sentry squirmed in Sergei's embrace. Sergei stroked the kid's

head with the fist that gripped the machete.

The man shook violently and whimpered into Sergei's palm. His last sounds were drowned by the roaring storm. Sergei felt the man's body sag heavily as the last trickle of life flowed out of his gaping wound.

Sergei cradled the man to the earth and stared into his pale, empty eyes. They looked soft, yet solid like talc. Sergei examined the blood that flowed down his knuckles. Rain drops dented the blood and painted it down his forearm. The warmth was quickly fading from it, just like the life-force from the dead man's eyes.

Sergei felt hollow beneath his cold, trembling flesh. The intoxicating energy of bloodlust filled his bones. He heard Tolstoy's agonized screams in the darkness within his cavernous skull.

Sergei started to run through the jungle. He ducked beneath the thick overhanging branches and weaved around the tree trunks, slipping through the thick foliage like a shadow. As Sergei ran, he watched the other sentry walking towards the point where he would have crossed paths with the first sentry. Sergei had to beat the sentry there, or else the mission would be a failure. The pounding thunder urged him on like the rhythm of war drums.

When Sergei reached the crossover point, he dropped to his knees and laid low, panting and soaked. The sentry was several dozen feet away, slowly trudging through the rain.

Sergei watched the approaching helmet and squeezed his machete. He held his breath. The cold earth sapped the heat out of his skin. The hollow cavity of his chest brewed with anticipation.

Thunderclouds boiled above the canopy and within his stomach. The man walked past Sergei and glanced up to see his fellow sentry. When he saw that he was alone, he quickly glanced back and forth, M16 raised. Sergei could see the panic in the boy's body language; his shoulders hunched; his spine twisting to turn and run. Sergei felt a smile briefly flutter across his lips.

When the sentry turned his back, Sergei took the young man in his arms. The razor's edge of the machete sliced neatly between the cartilage discs of his windpipe.

The boy's last breath escaped through the widening gash. Sergei felt the boy's muscles tremble and slacken upon the release of death. Scarlett streamed down Sergei's body in shining rivulets. Sergei's eye twitched. He disposed of the man's spasming cadaver beneath the ferns that choked the undergrowth.

Sergei took a deep breath of the damp air, and a sudden foghorn resonated throughout the valley. Sergei immediately dropped beneath the foliage and watched the sky from the periphery of the jungle.

Tolstoy had always taught Sergei to make the most out of a bad situation. When nature presented you with a danger or obstacle, you could exploit it to hurt your opponents. It was survival; adaptability.

It was with this in mind that Sergei watched a familiar leviathan's shadow glide through the oily sky above the American base.

A second shadow circled through the clouds, honking lowly between the punctuations of thunder. Sergei quickly exchanged his machete for the Dragunov and watched the rangers through the crosshairs of the scope.

The rangers pointed at the clouds and shouted over the rain to each other in panic. Several aimed their rifles at the massive wings that swept through the churning clouds. Lightning screamed and a quetzalcoatlus responded with a shrill, alarmed cry.

A few of the rangers ducked and scrambled together. They began to shrink into a tight circle. A long drone descended from the sky as a quetzalcoatlus slowly banked towards the men.

"What kind of bird is that?!" one man screamed.

A small grin trembled on Sergei's lips.

The rangers began to back away from the approaching shape. The drone turned into a howling bass, and the full form of a quetzalcoatlus speared through the cloud cover towards the rangers. Several of the rangers turned to run and slipped onto their faces in the mud, only to be trampled by the others. A few more men fell and became entangled in each other's limbs, screaming and splashing in the thick red clay. They were still squirming and clawing to get out when a quetzalcoatlus folded its wings and landed heavily beside them.

With calculated accuracy, the quetzalcoatlus snapped its beak around the neck of a ranger and wrenched him from the pile. The others howled and screamed in shock. Some of the rangers fired shots from behind cover, but the bullets hardly scraped the beast's leathery hide.

The ranger in the beak of the quetzalcoatlus was limp. His body hung heavily from his contorted neck. The quetzalcoatlus tilted its head back, staring down at the other men with beady yellow eyes,

and clamped off the ranger's head, swallowing it. The entangled men wailed and thrashed deeper into the mud in their struggle to escape.

The face of the decapitated head bulged from the inside of the quetzalcoatlus's throat in a gaping, mute scream. The mired rangers fought each other blindly, slipping over one another in the rain and mud in their panic.

The murky silhouette of the second quetzalcoatlus suddenly materialized above the rangers. The towering creature folded its wings and splashed down into the mud behind the pile of men. The two quetzalcoatlus snapped their beaks at one another, indifferent to the screeching men beneath them. After a few bellowing honks, the two beasts cast their eyes on the men and began spastically stabbing their beaks into the pile.

The screams rose to a delirious pitch. The beaks pierced through multiple limbs and organs with each strike. The pulverized, masticated corpses quickly became a seamless shape of pulped flesh and jutting bones. The other rangers around the base were cowering behind crates and buildings. One ranger was watching the ordeal from the corner of Jericho's trailer. He was thumbing through a rosary.

Sergei set his crosshairs on the man's throat and put his finger on the Dragunov's trigger.

"God saves none," Sergei whispered.

The Dragunov split the air and the praying man's throat erupted like a spigot. The man clutched at the gaping wound and slumped against the wall of the trailer. The other rangers ducked away from the shot, and Sergei found another man in the sights of the Dragunov.

Before Sergei could pull the trigger, one of the quetzalcoatlus descended onto the ranger and blocked his view. Sergei lowered the Dragunov and heard the echoing *whack* of the Quetzalcoatlus's beak.

While the rangers were distracted, Sergei sprinted along the tree line to the back of the base. Foliage washed over him as he ran. More of the rangers screamed from the clearing. One of the quetzalcoatlus honked a mournful baritone and the other predator trumpeted back in response. Sergei briefly shuddered at the sound. When Sergei reached the back of the base, he slipped out of the foliage and padded through the muddy clearing towards the

armory. He waved the Dragunov from side to side and kept his eyes on the slate clouds above. A quetzalcoatlus swept over Sergei, and he splashed into the mud.

Once the quetzalcoatlus passed, Sergei scrambled to his feet and ran to the back wall of Jericho's cabin. He could hear Jericho's voice muffled through the weather-worn walls.

With a deep breath, Sergei spun around the corner of the building and immediately opened fire on the closest ranger. Another ranger turned on his heel and returned fire but Sergei ducked and rolled through the mud for cover.

A quetzalcoatlus descended, blanketing the rangers in darkness as it swept over them. The quetzalcoatlus speared a ranger in the stomach and arced high, carrying him into the low-lying clouds of the storm, vanishing from sight. One of the men screamed, "*No, Jason!*"

A ferocious screech returned the man's cry as the other quetzalcoatlus dove through the clouds towards him. The ranger leapt out of the way, but the quetzalcoatlus spread its wings out, halting its descent. The quetzalcoatlus dropped onto the ranger, shielding him from his friends with walls of leathery wing membrane. The rangers opened fire and the air was filled with chattering gunshots.

The quetzalcoatlus squawked and ducked its head, shielding itself from the barrage. The shrill screams of the man it had taken were suddenly cut short. The quetzalcoatlus raised its head, and the man's entrails were strewn from the sharp tips of its beak. The creature's eyes were bleak and thoughtless, blinking dully as bullets struck its back.

The entrance to the armory was completely unguarded. The rangers in the clearing were distracted, ducking for cover as they opened fire on the quetzalcoatlus. Sergei ran from behind his cover and charged for the armory, kicking wildly through the knee-high muck. A few of the rangers opened fire on Sergei, pattering the mud around his feet. Sergei slipped and slid on his back towards the door of the armory. A ranger spun around a crate and stood before Sergei, M16 raised, yelling beneath the chaotic din.

A gust of wind lashed mud across Sergei's face and the ranger's screams were cut short. When Sergei opened his eyes, the ranger was gone. He looked to the sky and saw one of the quetzalcoatlus rising into the clouds, carrying the young man in its talons. The

soldier was thrashing and wailing, but he was silenced by the crash of thunder.

The quetzalcoatlus let go of the man, and he tumbled through open air. He vanished within the low-hanging storm clouds, re-emerged, and was speared-through by the other flying quetzalcoatlus. The force of the impact severed the man in two, and his divided sections flailed down to the earth, connected by long bungees of intestine. Sergei stared, entranced. The decimated remains of the ranger plummeted to the earth and erupted upon impact with a pair of soft *whumps*. The two quetzalcoatlus silently circled through the storm. One of the quetzalcoatlus dropped down beside the splattered gore of the ranger to eat.

The other quetzalcoatlus banked low and glided towards Sergei with astonishing speed. With a quick yelp of fear, Sergei threw open the door of the armory and dove inside for cover. The quetzalcoatlus trumpeted, and Sergei scrambled to his feet to slam the heavy steel door shut. He backed into the darkness of the structure, clambering over crates and knocking over metal racks of ammunition.

The quetzalcoatlus gave a low groan on the other side of the door. There was no impact; the creature must have halted its descent at the last instant.

Sergei gave a sigh of relief and his shoulders slackened. His hand fell on top of the long metal barrel of a rifle. Sergei ran his hand down the length of the weapon and pulled the heavy machinery out of the clutter. He hefted the impressive weight and smiled shakily. Yes, Tolstoy would have been proud.

Leon hadn't had any luck sleeping, so Susan stayed by his side until he finally fell into a fitful slumber. As the day progressed and the storm drowned the sounds of the outside world, Susan felt herself lulled to sleep by the peaceful drone of rainfall. They slept soundly until mid-afternoon when the storm was suddenly overpowered by the clattering fire-fight and the screams of dying men.

Susan awoke with a cry of shock, flinching with each of the gunshots that shook the windows. Leon, who was still on a heavy morphine drip, dozed through the chaos. Susan quickly shook him by the arm.

"Leon, wake up," Susan whispered. "*Wake up!*"

With a tired groan, Leon groggily returned to consciousness. As

soon as the familiar sounds of screaming death rattles hit his ears, he instinctively rolled off of the bed and hit the ground hard, tangled in his sheets. He tore off the bedding, panting wildly, and pulled Susan against his bandaged torso. They cowered behind the bed.

"What's going on?" Susan asked quickly, "What's happening?!"

"I don't know, but stay down!" Leon hissed. His senses were muddled by the morphine and his brain was slow to recover from his sleep.

Susan flinched in Leon's arms with each ear-splitting *crack* of a rifle. A powerful honk suddenly shook the window in its frame.

Leon's heart hammered sluggishly against Susan's. They stared in petrified silence at the blinds masking the massacre outside. Several men screamed, and more gunfire commenced. They heard the droning call of a second animal. Susan turned rigid in Leon's arms.

"*What the hell was that?*" she whispered.

"I don't know," Leon muttered. He gently touched his stomach.

The orchestra of screams, gunshots, and honking rose to an apocalyptic crescendo. Leon shivered violently at the cacophony of sounds. He was afraid to see what new animal lied in wait outside. He couldn't muster the strength to go to the window.

Leon sank into Susan's embrace like a child, smothering his wet face into her shoulder. He would give anything to run and hide, but he was a Vulture at heart. He had to do something.

Very slowly, Leon let go of Susan and crouched beside the window.

Susan clutched Leon and pleaded, "Please, Leon, just sit--"

"It's okay," Leon said, facing Susan.

Susan's lips quivered. Her eyes were as round as the moon. Leon could see the full distress roiling beneath her glassy irises. He felt a pang of guilt. He gave her a tight hug and turned back to the window.

The sounds of the firefight had dwindled. Something heavy stirred through the mud outside.

Leon let go of Susan and slowly climbed onto the bed. She watched him in silent terror, trembling with anxious energy. Leon watched her cautiously and forced a wary smile, then turned to the window and hooked his fingers through the blinds. Leon slowly pulled the blinds open to peer out. His heartbeat was in his throat, but he had to see what was happening.

When Leon pulled the blinds open, all he saw was a stretched wing

membrane. At first he didn't understand what he was looking at, but when the wing pulled back, he was greeted by the creature's giraffe neck and six-foot beak. The creature stared blankly at Leon with beady eyes and opened its beak wide, revealing a severed human arm wrapped in its quilled tongue. The quetzalcoatlus jerked its head back, swallowing the limb whole.

Leon let go of the blinds and recoiled from the window. He fell off the bed, scrambled to his feet, and ran to the back of the room. His heart pounded in his chest. Susan watched as Leon grabbed her desk and started dragging it across the floor.

"What was it?" Susan asked. "What'd you see?"

"You don't want to know," Leon muttered. He dragged the desk to the doorway and wedged it beneath the doorknob. Next, he grabbed a cabinet and dragged it over as well, and then another. Susan's eyes flicked back and forth as she watched Leon. She wrung her shirt in her fists. A quetzalcoatlus trumpeted outside. The storm howled.

While Leon dragged more cabinets towards the doorway, curiosity got the better of Susan. She slowly crawled on top of the bed and edged closer to the window, pulling apart the blinds to peer through.

Leon glanced over his shoulder and he let go of the cabinet.

"Susan, no!"

Susan opened the blinds and saw Sergei aiming an M60 heavy machine gun at her from across the clearing. Susan tore away from the blinds and the glass pane shattered, exploding into the room with the scream of automatic fire.

Leon yelled and leapt towards Susan, but his foot caught on an IV line, and he slid through broken glass. A warm red mist caressed Leon's bare back as bullets tore through the room and punctured the back wall.

The gunshots suddenly cut off and gave way to a ringing echo. The wind groaned through the gaping window, pushing cold air and rain inside. Leon scrambled to his feet and hundreds of tiny glass shards sliced through his bare skin. He smeared blood across the floor towards the bed, chanting, *"No, oh god, oh god, oh god-"*

Leon climbed onto the bed and found Susan clutching a rose-petal belt of bullet wounds across her waist. Leon whimpered and pulled her into his arms. The window was wide open and the blinds were torn away. He glanced outside and saw the remains of the massacre,

the rangers strewn across the mud.

The ground was covered in puddles of rainwater and blood, and amongst it all was Sergei, slowly walking towards the barracks with his back to the infirmary. Leon stared in shock at the back of Sergei's head, and when Sergei momentarily glanced over his shoulder, his face was permanently etched into Leon's mind.

"He-help..." Susan choked.

Susan collapsed into Leon's arms and her hands fell away from her stomach. Leon whimpered wordlessly and put his hand over her face. Blood flowed freely from her bullet wounds and dripped over her torso, pooling between Leon's knees. Her lips were dull, and her skin was so pale it seemed translucent.

"Don't go, Susan," Leon rasped, "Please, stay awake."

Susan's lips quivered to make words, and froze. Leon could see the flicker of life fading from her eyes, and he started to pant heavily, pulling her closer to keep her warm. He snaked his fingers through hers and moaned at how painfully cold they were, like they had been carved from ice.

Leon closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to hers. He tried to speak, but no words would form between his quivering lips. A slow moan formed deep in his chest, animalistic in its agony. He put his hand over her staring, glassy eyes and he sobbed into her chest, again smothering his face into her neck for fleeting comfort.

The storm howled through the window.

Even from across the clearing, Sergei could perfectly see the look in Leon's eyes and the dark dullness in the eyes of the woman that he held in his arms. Sergei faltered, feeling the horror rising in his body. He quickly faced forward and stumbled drunkenly through the rain towards the barracks. His cheeks quivered, and his eyes twitched.

He felt something leaking fluid in his chest; warm emotions beneath his ribs. He didn't think he would ever kill a woman, or anybody innocent for that matter. But who was innocent? He was just hunting soldiers, dangerous enemies that needed to be subdued...if Nikita was going to survive, Sergei had to kill them. Sergei's mind was rapidly misfiring.

Sergei wasn't a murderer; he was a hero trying to save his friend. He couldn't have killed that woman, but her pale eyes were frozen in his mind. Sergei staggered towards the barracks. The rain pounded his back like the fists of a woman who no longer could.

The wind thrashed the forest as a vengeful beast.

Sergei could hear the screams, could feel them reverberating through his bones, and he stumbled into the mud, clutching the sides of his head, shrieking over the screams trapped in his skull. He panted, clawing at his scalp, trying to suppress Susan's face from the darkness behind his eyes. He used the M60's massive barrel like a cane and pushed himself back to his feet, to the door of the barracks.

Sergei kicked in the door and pointed the M60 inside. The two remaining Vietnamese boys were standing on either side of Nikita, who was tied to a chair in the center of the room. The boys dropped their rifles and raised their hands over their heads. The older of the two, a boy with a thin moustache, stammered something in Vietnamese. Sergei's face was blank, and almost showed a trace of pity.

Sergei pulled the trigger and mulched the stammering boy's face. He then directed the rifle to the other boy and churned his gut into soup with a volley of shots. Nikita's cries were muffled through his gag as blood splashed across his face and upper body. His eyes followed the boys' bodies to the floor, then back up to Sergei. Thunder shook the small cabin. Nikita stared at Sergei with immense eyes. The younger man stepped over the bodies of the dead children and replaced the M60 with his machete. When Nikita saw the blood-soaked blade, his eyes stretched open even wider and he began to whimper madly through the bandana tied over his mouth.

"Easy, comrade," Sergei rasped, "You're safe now. Safe with me." Nikita cried desperately and struggled against the ropes that bound him to the chair. Sergei raised the machete, still dripping dark burgundy, and sliced it through Nikita's binds. Nikita remained in the chair, staring at Sergei in horror.

Sergei smiled blankly and pulled the bandana off of Nikita's mouth. Nikita's jaw fell, and he gawked at Sergei.

Sergei extended his arms. Blood draped his torso like scarlet silk robes.

"Come, comrade," Sergei said. "We have work to do."

Nikita stared at Sergei. He had heard the chaos outside, but he didn't believe that it could have been because of him.

"Sergei," Nikita said in a hushed voice. "What have you done?"

"Come," Sergei said, "I'll show you."

There was something missing in his pale eyes; he smiled, but there was no emotion. Nikita got cold chills just looking at him. He watched as Sergei stepped out of the barracks and into the steady rainfall.

Nikita glanced at the two boys at his feet, bleeding profusely and twitching. Nikita could feel their dead eyes following him as he climbed out of the chair and followed Sergei into the storm.

"Dear god," Nikita whispered.

His knees shook, and he doubled over to steady himself. The rain was refreshing against his skin, but he could hardly think. His heart was beating fast, and his hands trembled.

"I wasn't worth all of this, Sergei," Nikita said. "My life wasn't worth all of this..."

Sergei put a hand on Nikita's shoulder, but he flinched away.

"I wasn't worth it, Sergei!" Nikita screamed. "I wasn't worth the lives of all these *kids*!"

"I did what I had to do," Sergei said, "I needed to save--"

"No, Sergei, you didn't have to *save* me!" Nikita bellowed. "You could have left me and made it back to Borodin's compound alive! Look at me; I don't have a life to live anymore! I've given my life to this military. You could have left these young men alive and they could have had futures, but now they can't because you've murdered them!"

Nikita shoved Sergei and screamed, "You've *murdered* them!"

"It was you or them, comrade," Sergei said. "I did what had to be done to ensure the success of the mission, and that meant killing these American pigs."

He spat at the bloody puddles at his feet.

"Now help me capture this general so we can go back to Borodin's compound and be done with all of this."

"*Borodin is using* you," Nikita hissed. "Can't you see that!? He's just working us like dogs, and it's all for nothing! What we need to do is ask him--no, we need to *demand* that he tell us what the dinosaurs are doing here. He clearly has some sort of involvement in all of this, and he needs to pay for his crimes. He needs to pay for what happened to Tolstoy and Aleksandr, and for what he's done to you!"

Nikita lowered his voice and grabbed Sergei by the arms.

"Can't you see what this place has done to you? What Borodin has done by sending you here?"

Sergei pulled his arms away from Nikita.

“He’s made me stronger,” Sergei said. “I’m on my way to becoming a warrior like Tolstoy, a true Russian hero. I don’t know what Borodin’s involvement was with the dinosaurs here, but if you need to know so badly then you should find out for yourself. Help me take this general back to Borodin’s base, and I’m sure you’ll get all the answers you need.”

Nikita shook his head.

“Fine, Sergei. Where is he?”

“Right here.”

The butt of an M1 Garand cracked against the back of Nikita’s head, and he fell to his knees in the mud. As soon as Sergei turned to see Jericho, the butt of the rifle cracked into his jaw and spun him around. Jericho stepped over Sergei and lowered the barrel of the M1 Garand to Nikita’s face, panting through clenched teeth.

Before Jericho could pull the trigger, Sergei swung his legs into the back of Jericho’s knees, collapsing him into the mud as well. Sergei scrambled to his feet and raised the M60, firing a round inches from Jericho’s head. Jericho flinched and put his hands in the air.

Nikita got to his feet and took the M1 Garand from Jericho’s hands, pointing it at his face. Jericho glanced up at Sergei. The young man’s filthy body blended against the rapidly darkening sky.

“Get up,” Sergei growled.

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX – DEBRIS

The jungle seemed to be in the throes of death around Bishop and the black ops team. Bishop had attempted to raise Jericho on the radio, but there was no answer; an extremely unsettling sign. The Black Ops team raced downriver, careful to avoid the horde of kaprosuchus, and they reached the outside of Jericho’s base in a matter of hours.

The black ops team raced uphill through walls of crashing rainfall as the trees swung and shook from the powerful gusts. When Bishop emerged from the jungle to the open air of Jericho’s base, he stopped in his tracks. The rest of the squad stumbled into him from behind. They stared into the clearing.

Bishop’s voice came from the bottom of his throat.

“Oh, god.”

Bishop was physically halted by the grotesque menagerie of decimated human bodies. The pit where the entangled rangers had been struggling to get out of had become a bowl in the mud filled

with a thick soup of pulped gore. Organs bobbed in the bloody rainwater like red, fleshy bulbs. All around the pit were mangled corpses covered in gaping puncture wounds and lacerations from the quetzalcoatlus's sharp beaks. The men observed the horrific carnage in silent shock.

Bishop raised his AK-47 and stepped into the clearing. He motioned for Shadow and Ozzie to go to the barracks to check on Nikita and for Ibex to check on Jericho in his trailer, and then he turned and made a bee-line for the infirmary. The tension in the air was overwhelming, driving them to sprint to their destinations.

Beneath the undergrowth across the clearing, Sergei and Nikita lay on their stomachs, watching the black ops team. Jericho was bound and gagged between them, writhing and growling with a bandana tied over his mouth. Sergei put a hand on the back of Jericho's head and shoved him face-down into the mud, smothering him. Nikita elbowed Sergei and shoved his hand away from Jericho's head.

Ignoring him, Sergei cautiously rose to his feet and watched as the black ops team moved into their assigned buildings. He grabbed Jericho by the collar of his shirt and pulled him upright.

"Come," Sergei said. "They have a boat."

Nikita nodded hesitantly and raised his rifle, following Sergei downhill towards the river. He glanced over his shoulder at the carnage that Sergei had wrought and shuddered. Nikita didn't want to be around when the Americans came looking for Jericho.

Bishop's pulse leapt as he approached the infirmary. The wind swept through the window; the blinds rattled like bones. Bishop's ears were pricked to the sound of the rainfall, trying to discern any subtle differences within it.

As he stepped up to the infirmary window, he could hear somebody's low respirations rising and falling, as if carried by an ocean's tide. He leaned into the window and shook his head when he saw the bloodstains on the white bed sheets.

Leon was cradling Susan's lifeless body on the floor. His bare, bandaged torso was smeared with the blood that had seeped through her shirt. Leon rocked on his heels, his head buried into her neck, sobbing silently.

"Leon?" Bishop asked.

Leon glanced over his shoulder and stared through Bishop with a thousand-yard stare. He opened his mouth to say something, but all that came out was a painful moan. Bishop climbed through the

window, planting his muddy boots onto the snow-white bed sheets, and Leon continued to stare beyond their realm of reality.

Bishop dropped down from the bed and his boots crunched shattered glass. He crouched in front of Leon and took his sunglasses off. His piercing blue eyes dug into Leon intensely.

“Who did this?” Bishop asked.

Leon traced Susan’s cheekbone with a bloodied finger. He gently brushed the hair from her eye and tucked it behind her ear.

“It was the Russian,” Leon said. He didn’t take his eyes off of Susan’s parted lips. “He attacked, and he ran, like a coward. I would have chased him down, but I couldn’t leave her...”

His voice softened. “I couldn’t leave her like this.”

Bishop stood up and glanced out the window. Ozzie, Ibex, and Shadow were all walking towards the infirmary, empty-handed. Bishop looked back at Leon.

Leon rose to his feet and gently laid Susan onto the bed, pulling the rose-petal marked blanket over her body. He winced and doubled over, one hand on his stomach, and took a deep breath. “He can’t get away with this,” Leon said. “He has to pay for what he’s done. I’m going with you, and we’re going to kill that monster.”

Leon pulled open the drawer from his bed-side table and rummaged through it until he found a morphine syrette. Bishop glanced back outside while Leon injected the morphine into his arm.

The distant thrumming of rotor blades emerged from the monotonous rain. Bishop looked out the window and saw the Father Vulture rocking through the granite and charcoal clouds.

“He won’t get away with it,” Bishop said. “Come on, we need to get to Vulture Squad. If we can get a hold of them, we might have a chance at stopping the Russians. It’s the best that we can do for now.”

Bishop pulled the bed away from the window and climbed out. When he glanced over his shoulder, he saw Leon frozen beside the bed, staring at the red rings soaking through the white sheets.

Leon pulled the blanket over Susan’s face and bowed his head.

“Give me a minute,” Leon said.

Bishop nodded and splashed into a puddle outside.

Leon listened to the rain. He saw that Susan’s hand had slipped out of the blanket, so he knelt down and held it. He stroked her

hand gently, no longer rendered emotionally by the sensation of cold flesh sapping the warmth from his skin. His breathing became heavy and labored. He bowed his head and kissed her hand, then placed it back beneath the blanket.

Leon no longer felt hollow.

He only felt rage.

Ryan stood beneath the broad canopy of the Kapok trees on the river bank. It was dark and cool beneath the Kapok's thick plumage, but the air beyond the reach of their branches was filled with a torrential downpour as thick as hail.

Ryan leaned against the Kapok's thick trunk and watched as the river boiled and frothed beneath the assault. He was tired and weary, trying to control the trembling in his fingers by squeezing his fists. His eyes were dry and biting, so he blinked sporadically and adjusted his wool mask. The only thing he felt at this point was exhaustion.

A few feet away from Ryan, Andrei was curled in a ball between the Kapok's crocodile-tail roots, rocking on his heels. His withdrawal was building into a ferocious storm that was slowly forcing its way out of his body. His painful moans sounded like they were riding a wave deep within his gut, surging out with desperate urgency before pitifully receding back inside.

The rest of the team was silent. Xavier checked on Andrei's vitals every few minutes before returning his attention to Nguyen, whom had received a few burns and cuts from pieces of shrapnel along his bare torso. Nguyen attempted to stifle a pained cry as Xavier gently tugged a thorn of metal from his shoulder.

Ryan winced as he watched Xavier's bloody work. He turned away and focused his attention on Eli, who sat with his back to the team several feet away.

After Ryan found Eli at the Viet Cong camp, he and Xavier dragged him away before they could be found by any dinosaurs. Andrei and Xavier both agreed that the utahraptors had to be stalking the squad, so they quickly backtracked to the river where they had a more open view of their surroundings.

Nobody had expected Eli's reaction. By the time they reached the river's edge, he had fallen eerily silent, and everybody gave him his space. He was sitting on one of the Kapok tree's immense roots with his empty flask in hand, staring into his own reflection in the

scratched copper surface. Ryan stepped away from the Kapok's weathered trunk and walked to Eli's side.

Ryan had no words to give to Eli. He understood the pain of loss, and he understood the weight of guilt, but there was no repairing what had happened. Eli may have been insubordinate and irresponsible, but it wasn't Ryan's job to demean or instigate him. The most that he could do was be there for him, just as McNeil had been there for Ryan time and time again.

Ryan sat a foot away from Eli on the Kapok's knee-high root. A blast of thunder shook the tree tops, and Ryan tugged on his mask uncomfortably. The wildlife of the jungle remained silent.

Eli didn't acknowledge Ryan's presence for a few minutes. He shook the empty flask in his hand. The lid rang like a bell as it bounced against the copper. Eli sighed, and finally spoke.

"This flask was a gift from my pappy," he mumbled. "Right before I left for boot camp. It was passed down to him by my grandpappy, and by his pappy before him, all the way down to me. Pappy said that I needed it more than he did, since I was going to war. Alcohol's always been a part of who we was, and it's been passed down to us through our genes and through this flask. I guess it makes sense that I'd be a fuck up just like them."

Eli stared into his distorted, amber-hued reflection in the flask and saw his father's eyes. He lowered the flask with a weary sigh and raised his eyes to the storm beyond the river bank.

"I wish I wasn't like this, Ryan," Eli mumbled. "I wish I could have been stronger."

Ryan nodded slowly, watching Eli with pale green eyes. Andrei continued to moan a few feet away, and the song of the storm was turning into ambient timbre beneath their conversation.

"Why did you start drinking out here, Eli?" Ryan asked. "You wouldn't stop hitting that flask the moment Miller was gone."

Eli closed his eyes and shook his head gently. It was difficult for him to gather his words, but after a few failed attempts of opening his mouth and shutting it, he finally spoke.

"Because of the silence," he whispered.

"What silence?" Ryan asked.

Eli frowned and chewed on a nail before settling his eyes on the flask.

"Just silence, I guess. Whenever I was with Miller, I could just keep talking with him, and it's not as quiet. We could shoot the shit

and make jokes and be comfortable. When he's not around, I get inside my head, and all that's in there is the past.

"Every man I've killed, the villages I helped burn to the ground, the bodies I've stacked like sandbags, it's all I can think about when it's quiet. If I keep thinking about those things, then I can't fight, and if I can't fight, I'm dead."

Eli swallowed heavily and closed his eyes.

"There was this time when Miller and I was in our Force Recon squad, all we did was go village-hopping. We'd go from village to village looking for suspected Viet cong lieutenants, arms smugglers, informants, all that. We got really paranoid after Hue City, and we were all on edge.

"I know how that can be," Ryan said. "Village hopping is hell."

Eli nodded. "None of us cared if we blew somebody away," he said. "We knew that most villages were death traps, and we could get ambushed any minute. We started to get a little ruthless; even Miller. We were at the point we would knock a man out with our rifles if he so much as looked at us.

"I knew Miller was struggling with his faith at the time, but I wasn't. I hated the fucking Vietnamese. I wouldn't think twice about burying a few fished-faced fuckers if it meant staying alive a little bit longer, maybe even going home a little earlier.

"The last village we was assigned to check out, it was right off of the Han River. We was told that after this last village, we'd get to move on to our next assignment. Get away from the fuckin' monotony and stress of village hopping. The place was small, just a dozen huts or so, and the people was complacent. They had some cattle and pigs running about in the mud, and it was raining real heavy.

"That's what I remember the most about that place--the rain. It seemed like the sky had opened up and that every single star was a drop of rain falling onto us. The stars were falling on us, and they were filling our heads. We couldn't think. We had only paranoia and dreams of home."

At the mention of falling stars, Ryan looked away from Eli and watched the roiling river. He clenched his hands to stop them from shaking. Eli didn't notice. He continued to speak.

"The last hut that our sergeant checks out, he finds something. He won't tell us what it is, but while we're all tense and freaking out, he runs out and says that they're Cong, they're all Viet Cong,

fucking shoot ‘em all, shoot ‘em all, and we start shooting. We don’t even think, we just pull the triggers and start letting loose.”

Eli bit his lower lip. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and exhaled shakily. It was his first time ever recanting the memory to another person, and he couldn’t stop the momentum of the exorcism.

“In no time at all, we was running like madmen through the village, gunning down every last man, woman, and child, every granny and pappy, even their livestock, we’re shooting and we don’t stop shooting and we can’t ever stop shooting.

“We don’t look into each other’s eyes as we run past ‘cause we know what we’ll see. We’ll see everything inside of ourselves, our fear and desperation and hate and terror, all of it let out through the barrels of our M16’s and M60’s and shotguns as we mowed down every last living soul in that village.”

Eli clenched his jaw shut and covered his face. His shoulders shook, and his chest seemed to fold inward from powerful contractions. Eli wheezed through his teeth as he tried to control himself. Streams of water crawled from the corners of his eyes. Tears or rain; Ryan couldn’t tell.

“I killed a child, Ryan,” Eli choked, “I shot her dead like her mom. I can still see their faces at the exact moment I pulled the trigger, and I still see their faces every time I close my eyes. Whenever there’s silence, it’s like I’m pulled back to the mass grave that we dumped her and every other innocent person from that village.

“I’m crouched at the lip of this mass grave that I helped fill, and I’m watching the blood drip down the bare breast of this woman, and her daughter stares through me like she knows that this is the moment that my life was always building towards. If it weren’t for that, Miller might still be alive, and I may have been a stronger man.”

Eli sobbed into his hands.

“God, I could have saved him, Ryan.”

“Did you really kill them, Eli?” Ryan asked. He stared intently. “Or did Miller kill them?”

Eli wiped the tears from his eyes and took a shuddering breath.

“We were all guilty,” Eli said. “We killed them all, Miller and me both, we were all guilty like the rest of our squad, we were all responsible. And you know what? We never found out what that

sergeant found in that last hut. He never told us. I'll never know why he wanted us to kill them. It was all a fucking waste, Ryan."

"Fear can make monsters of men," Ryan said, shaking his head. "What you have to do is what Miller did; you have to face what you've done. You can say Miller hid behind religion, but he was still coming to terms with what he did every day. He didn't try to escape; he tried to make amends."

"The past is a part of you, but it doesn't have to be *who* you are," Ryan continued. "If you keep hiding, you'll only give your shadow strength over who you really are, or who you could be. There's no escape; only survival. You have to accept the things you can't change and learn from them to grow and adapt; evolve."

Static buzzed from the radio in Ryan's backpack.

Ryan stood and pulled a crumpled paper ball from his pocket. He tossed it to Eli.

"Here, Nguyen said to give this to you," Ryan said. "I have to take this, but I'll be right back."

Eli caught the crumpled ball and watched as Ryan took the radio to Xavier's side. While Xavier stitched Nguyen's wounds shut, Ryan lifted the headset to his ear and began to speak in a hushed voice.

Eli was only half-listening to Ryan as he stared at the paper ball in his hands. From what Eli could tell, something was wrong. Ryan was speaking in clipped, urgent whispers.

Eli stopped paying attention to Ryan as he slowly unfolded the crumpled paper. The wet ball fell open like an origami lotus blooming in the sunlight, and in the center of the bloom, shone the silver crucifix from Miller's rosary.

Eli caught his breath. He held the crucifix in a shaking hand, trying to steady himself. His eyes fell to the crinkled paper and saw a single note scratched across what appeared to be graph paper.

Find your way.

Eli pressed the crucifix to his forehead, and he wept.

"Is Leon okay..?" Ryan spoke into the radio's headset. "Good, and Jericho..?...Oh..."

The others watched Ryan in silence. The rain filled Ryan's pauses.

"Jesus. Where's the prisoner? Where are the Rangers? Is there any chance of summoning a garrison, or any of the strike forces that Jericho promised?...Christ," Ryan murmured.

Ryan paced with the radio headset against his ear. Bullets of

sweat were sliding down his face. After a few seconds of garbled static, he lowered the headset and shook his head woefully, cupping his forehead.

“What’s going on?” Xavier asked.

“Jericho’s gone,” Ryan said “Everybody back at base is dead, except for Leon. Jericho’s missing and the prisoner is gone. Bishop thinks that the prisoner escaped with the help of some Spetsnaz. We have to get Jericho back, and we have to stop the Collider, but we don’t even know where to begin to look. They could be anywhere in this valley, if they even have Jericho in the valley anymore.”

A dreadful silence fell over the men. Eli cast his eyes down to the paper ball, and as he continued to unfold it, he saw the meticulously drawn lines of a topographical map. He quickly unfolded it the rest of the way until the map was spread wide before him.

Find your way.

Eli stood up quickly.

“I know where Jericho is!”

“Is that a map?” Ryan asked. “Quick, let me see it!”

Ryan took the map and quickly skimmed it over. At the northernmost edge of the valley, several miles north of the POW camp and Vulture Squad’s current location, was a box with the Soviet hammer and sickle symbol inside. A dotted line traced the Viet Cong’s trail from their camp to the Russian compound and back. Ryan’s eyes opened wide, and he felt a surge of adrenaline rise in his chest. For the first time it what had seemed to be ages, he finally felt hope.

Ryan put the headset to his ear and rapidly counted off Vulture Squad’s coordinates into the receiver.

“Hurry, Bishop; we’ve got a map to the Russian Compound,” he said. “If we can’t find Jericho there, we can at least stop the Russians before they use the Collider again.”

Lowering the headset, he looked at the rest of the squad. They stared anxiously.

“Miller might be gone, but this mission is far from over,” Ryan said. “Get ready. We’re ending this *now*.”

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN – MONSTERS

“You will break, American pig,” Sergei growled.

Sergei and Nikita dragged Jericho up the muddy path to the entrance of the Russian compound. At the head of the trail, a

hellfire burned through the encroaching dark of night. The steady rainfall thrummed in their ears and drilled through the surrounding walls of foliage. Neither man elicited a reaction to the storm; Sergei and Nikita had both become numb to the harsh conditions of Vietnam's jungles

Further ahead, through the dark tunnel of understory vegetation and gargantuan tree trunks, loomed the massive steel doors of the compound's gate. A pair of silhouetted figures slowly swung the doors open. The light of the fire beyond intensified. Nikita narrowed his eyes and put his finger on the trigger of his AK-47. Sergei and Nikita had hardly spoken during their frenzied, desperate race upriver. Sergei had grown cold and distant, a trembling shell of the predator he had become. Nikita, however, had become deeply withdrawn and anxious. He had been constantly checking over his shoulder as he piloted the boat to make sure that Sergei wasn't slitting Jericho's throat.

Nikita no longer trusted the young man; as far as Nikita was concerned, Sergei was just as brutal and dangerous as the animals that had killed Tolstoy and Aleksandr. Nikita only wanted to give Jericho over to Borodin as a sacrificial lamb to save himself. As selfish as it was, Nikita was more than willing to put Jericho's fate into Borodin's hands if it meant escaping the war.

As Sergei and Nikita approached the intense light of the fire that poured through the compound's entrance, the two shadows guarding it began to sharpen into focus. They were both dressed in all-black fatigues and gas masks, cradling AK-47 assault rifles.

Nikita felt a cold chill run down his spine. The two men silently followed him with the barrels of their rifles. The guards didn't say anything to acknowledge Sergei and Nikita's presence.

"What are the masks for, comrade?" Nikita asked.

When the guard spoke, his voice came as a mechanical hiss through the filter of his mask.

"General Borodin is preparing to test-fire the Collider tonight," the man said. "He won't let us take any risks in safety, especially in protecting our borders from the American interlopers."

Nikita cautiously eyed the man from head to toe.

"And what is the Collider being used for, exactly?" Nikita asked. "I don't believe I was ever told."

"It's for bettering the motherland," the man recited. "It's going to help us win the arms and space race, and it's going to make our

nation more powerful than the tyrannical United States. In order to fulfill General Borodin's mission, we must remain vigilant in defending the Collider from all aggressors, no matter the cost." Nikita looked at Sergei, but Sergei was distracted by the shadows cast from the fire that were dancing across the foliage. Nikita turned back to the soldier.

"But what is the Collider being used for?" Nikita asked. "What does it even do? Has Borodin told you about any of these things?"

The man stared at Nikita. The rain pattered on his gas mask.

"I just told you," the man grunted. "Now hurry up and get in there; Borodin is expecting you, and he doesn't like to be kept waiting."

The man aimed his AK-47 at Nikita and waved him and Sergei inside. Nikita glared at the guard as he walked through the gates and into the compound. Sergei lifted Jericho and followed Nikita inside. The two guards watched them as they went, and then turned their attention back to the jungle beyond.

The interior of the compound was brimming with activity. Dozens of hot barrel fires were scattered throughout the center of the clearing, and soldiers wielding powerful rifles bustled about.

Nikita and Sergei dragged Jericho face-down through the mud towards Borodin's pill-box bunker in the far corner of the compound. They cautiously watched the soldiers running around them. Nikita couldn't shake the feeling that all eyes were on him and Sergei.

"Be careful, Sergei," Nikita muttered. "We're alone here. You realize that, right?"

Sergei shook his head but said nothing. His eyes were wide and flickering, darting from soldier to soldier. He was like a cornered dog, anticipating an attack or ambush. He looked like a savage pried from the jungle, baptized in blood and filth.

Nikita looked away from Sergei and turned to Borodin's office. The door swung open and Viktor stepped outside, clad in the same black fatigues and gas mask as the other soldiers. He looked from Sergei to Nikita and down to Jericho before grunting what could be considered a laugh. He stood aside and motioned them into the warmly lit room, where Borodin sat behind his desk with a bottle of vodka.

"Sergei, Nikita!" Borodin beamed. "Come inside and have a drink with me; we're about to celebrate the arrival of our guest," he motioned to Jericho with the bottle.

Sergei and Nikita dragged Jericho inside and dropped him at Viktor's feet. Jericho panted hoarsely and tried to squirm away, but he didn't have the strength. Sergei and Nikita sat down in a pair of chairs across from Borodin.

Viktor shut the steel door behind them. The muffled shouts of the soldiers outside became muffled through the concrete walls. Rain drummed across a single window beside the door. Borodin leaned over the edge of his desk and smiled at Jericho's beaten, bruised face.

"You certainly did a number on this man, didn't you?" Borodin said, looking at Sergei. "Where are Tolstoy and Aleksandr?"

"They didn't make it," Nikita said. "They were killed by monsters. *Your* monsters."

"*My* monsters?" Borodin asked, feigning surprise with a hand over his heart. "I'm not sure I follow, Nikita. Are you speaking about the dinosaurs, or are you talking about something else?"

Nikita's eyes opened wide.

"You—you *knew* there were dinosaurs out there?" Nikita stammered, shaking with rage. "And you sent us out there without warning? You got Tolstoy and Aleksandr killed! You could have gotten *us* killed!"

General Borodin smiled and leaned back in his chair. He raised his hands in compliance.

"During the test firing of the first Collider, we had an accident and dinosaurs were released into the jungle. It didn't seem to be much of a problem for the natural environment, so we simply moved on and worked on rebuilding the collider. I believe whole-heartedly that Dr. Annushka has perfected this second model and that we'll have positive results this time around."

"You're insane!" Nikita shouted. "Do you have any idea what you're doing? You let monsters loose in these jungles, and they've been killing people, *our* people!"

Borodin rubbed his eyes.

"I'm not quite sure you understand, Nikita," Borodin said. "These dinosaurs were a natural side effect of the Collider's misuse. If we can operate it correctly – which we will – we won't have any mishaps. There are no negative repercussions to having dinosaurs in these jungles. It's as harmless as the steam let off by a nuclear reactor or a coal processing plant. Even though they don't belong in the natural ecosystem, they can't harm it. Just think of it as a

byproduct of the collider's godly power."

Sergei was grinding his teeth. "Your monsters *killed* Tolstoy and Aleksandr," he growled.

Borodin laughed and lowered his gaze onto Sergei's scarred face.

"Look at yourself, boy. Covered in shit and blood like a feral dog.

Do you have any idea why I sent you to capture this man?" Borodin motioned to Jericho with the bottle.

"I needed time. Nothing more, nothing less. You were told to fetch, and you happily went out and killed and raped and pillaged along the way, just because you could. That blood – it's not even yours, is it?"

Sergei continued to grind his teeth, but his hardened mask began to break. His face twitched and his dead eyes began to water with fresh emotion.

"The dinosaurs might kill and hunt, but it's only natural for them," Borodin said. "They have to feed. They do it to survive. You had a choice when I sent you out into the valley to capture this man, and you chose to do it in the most gruesome manner possible. I told you to fetch this man like the dog you are, and you chose to kill everybody in your way. The only monsters I ever released in this valley were men like *you*."

Sergei's stony face began to slacken. His lips trembled and his eyes spread open. Nikita remained silent. A smile jerked across Borodin's face.

"Since the beginning of mankind, we've always been reshaping the earth to fit our needs, altering it for the sake of killing each other over territory like a bunch of apes," Borodin said.

"The United States turned Hiroshima into a radioactive dust pile, and the Americans have filled countless acres of Vietnamese jungle with Agent Orange and DDT. What does it matter if I released some dinosaurs into a single valley?"

Borodin took a long drink from the bottle, and then placed it gently on his desk. He cracked his knuckles and smiled at Nikita.

"Man plays god through acts of war; we reshape the world to fit our desires, and we take countless lives along the way," Borodin said.

"But god feeds on the lives of the innocent. All of our greatest achievements as a species came through immense loss of human lives. What do two more matter?"

The loud *crack* of a gunshot pierced the air, and Sergei was splashed across the face with hot blood. He recoiled and saw Nikita's limp

body collapse to the floor beside Jericho. Sergei backed away and covered his face, screaming.

“Nikita, *no!*”

Sergei turned to pounce on Borodin, but Viktor stepped in the way and leveled the barrel of an AK-47 to his face. Sergei froze and stared at Borodin. His chest heaved with panting respirations. Borodin grinned and rose from his chair.

“The only monsters in this world are men, Sergei. We have a working Collider, and it’s going to be used tonight.” Borodin turned to Viktor. “Take him to the Collider so he can see the fruits of his labor. Nothing stops us tonight--neither man nor monster.”

They heard the muffled *crack* of a second gunshot through the metal door of the bunker. Borodin looked at Viktor, who shrugged. Borodin furrowed his brow and took a pistol from a drawer in his desk.

“Keep an eye on our prisoners,” Borodin said. He walked across the small room and pulled the door open. The sound of the storm returned with vibrant clarity.

Outside, the soldiers had stopped working and were watching as one of the guards from the gate came running through the clearing. He was dragging a twisted animal carcass through the mud behind him. The man panted through his gas mask as he struggled with the load. Borodin walked into the storm and waved for Viktor to follow. Viktor shoved the barrel of his AK-47 between Sergei’s shoulder blades and they marched outside. Everybody in the compound watched as the guard finally came to a stop in front of Borodin, leaning with his hands on his knees to catch his breath. The guard pulled off his gas mask and gasped for air.

“What do you have here?” Borodin asked.

“I found this...*thing* sniffing around the perimeter wall,” the guard said. He stood aside and pointed at the creature lying rigid in the mud.

The animal was the size of a turkey and covered in downy feathers that were matted with wet leaves and detritus. The small, boxy head stared with glassy eyes. Its slack jaw hung open, revealing rows of needle-like teeth. The small, grasping two-fingered arms still trembled. Blood oozed from several bullet wounds along its dull green flank. The slender legs twitched slightly. The guard saluted Borodin.

“There was another one nearby, but it went and hid behind a tree,”

the guard said. "What is this thing?"

Borodin didn't speak. His eyes were huge and wet, his mouth gaped open. He turned to face Viktor, and when he went to speak, a powerful roar rose from beyond the entrance of the compound. The ground shook throughout the clearing. Borodin spun on his heels and slapped the guard across the face, hard.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?!" Borodin screamed.

"Quick, Viktor, get rid of the prisoners! We need to get the collider ready, *now!*"

Somebody screamed from the entrance of the compound, and all of the men in the facility slowly turned to face the source of the sound. The towering steel doors of the gate were open, and in the darkness of the jungle beyond, a pair of ghastly eyes hovered twenty feet high above the forest floor.

In a flash of lightning, Borodin saw the legs of the second guard kicking from the clenched jaws of the Mother Tyrannosaurus. Her gargantuan brown body moved slowly, powerfully through the opened gates. Her dull brown feathers glistened red in the glow of the barrel fires that were scattered throughout the camp.

All of the Russian soldiers began to scream, scrambling to get out of the way of the massive beast. Borodin looked back and forth, but his men were already cowering in fear. The Mother was walking straight towards him, to the slain chick at his feet. He turned and ran.

Viktor turned to run as well, but Sergei pounced on top of him. The two men fought and rolled on the ground as the powerful footfalls came closer. The guard was gone, and the soldiers were screaming throughout the compound. The Mother Tyrannosaurus thundered closer.

Sergei strangled Viktor until his eyes were bulging beneath the lens of his gas mask. Sergei looked over his shoulder and saw the Mother crouching to sniff the body of her chick. The massive beast nudged the frail corpse, trying to make it wake up, and her chest started to heave with mounting panic.

The Mother Tyrannosaurus moaned loudly, shaking the air of the clearing. Some of the soldiers took shots at the massive predator from the cover of the other buildings, but most were sprinting for the safety of the building that housed the collider.

Viktor was gasping for air and half-screaming beneath Sergei. His fists struck Sergei in the chest and neck, but Sergei was mentally

absent from the fight. His eyes were on the Mother.

The Mother Tyrannosaurus lifted her head and howled mournfully into the storm clouds, a sound so powerful that Sergei felt it move up his spinal column and into his skull until it was filled to the point of bursting. A second animal returned the horrendous cry from beyond the perimeter wall. The wailing beast sounded almost as large as the gargantuan Mother.

The perimeter wall was struck by a powerful force, and Sergei heard the crackling of cement splitting apart. The sound repeated, again and again, until the sound of crumbling concrete became incessant.

The Father Tyrannosaurus had finally found his family.

Sergei locked eyes with the Mother Tyrannosaurus. She lifted her huge head and craned her neck as she roared again, spit flying from her jaws. Her chest heaved with rage. The behemoth bellowed again and charged towards Sergei and Viktor, lowering her neck to catch them in her jaws.

Sergei leapt off of Viktor with a scream of terror and rolled across the muddy clearing. Viktor scrambled to his feet, but the Mother's taloned foot came down on him, crushing him with a sickening wet *crunch*. He didn't even have time to scream.

Sergei scampered away from the huge behemoth and charged to the Collider. His boots kept slipping in the mud. He ran through the barricade of trees that stood before the building that housed the collider.

The sound of shattering concrete finally reached a climax. The wall to the right of Sergei burst apart with a shower of fractured mortar, and the Father Tyrannosaurus charged into the compound with a ferocious roar that made Sergei's knees buckle.

The Mother Tyrannosaurus quickly closed the distance to Sergei. She broke through the stand of trees and set the thin trunks rolling across the clearing. Sergei jumped over the bouncing logs and ran to the door of the Collider's housing.

Sergei turned and saw the Mother and Father snorting and huffing at each other. They rubbed their snouts against each other's manes, and a deep groan rose in the chest of the Father.

The Mother released an ear-splitting cry, raising her head to the storm clouds above. A powerful rumbling emanated from the Father Tyrannosaurus as he nuzzled his mate. Sergei paused to watch, briefly stunned by the sight.

The pair of leviathan predators stopped their vocalizations and turned to face Sergei. With a unanimous bellow, the behemoths charged.

Sergei looked over his shoulder at the doorway to the collider, where Borodin and the others were screaming and shouting throughout the building. Sergei looked back to the charging tyrannosaurs, and he dove out of the way.

The two tyrannosaurs struck the building head-on, collapsing the front face of the concrete structure inward. The men inside of the room screamed and dove for cover; others were crushed beneath slabs of cement. The howling of the massive animals drowned the cries of the dead and dying.

The tyrannosaurs stopped just short of hitting the collider; they were physically halted by the pulsing blue light. The Father Tyrannosaurus growled lowly, transfixed, but the Mother broke her attention and started snapping at the dozens of still-living humans darting around her feet to escape. The Father Tyrannosaurus turned his attention away as well and slammed his jaws shut over one of the Russians, splitting the screeching human in half.

The remaining men stood no chance; most were unarmed, and those that were could do little more than fire a few rounds at the massive predators before they were crushed underfoot or torn apart between the animals' powerful jaws.

Borodin was on the floor, cowering from the human stampede. The Mother bellowed over his head, and bones crunched in her jaws. Hot blood splashed over Borodin's body, and a pair of severed legs bounced off of his back. He snapped out of his shock, retching in horror, and started dragging himself across the floor.

The taloned foot of the Mother slammed down on a crawling scientist beside Borodin. The man screamed and blood jettisoned from his gaping mouth.

Borodin cried out and scrambled away, around the collider, to a door on the opposite wall. The Father Tyrannosaurus roared from behind him and the body of a soldier sailed over Borodin's head. Borodin saw the mangled corpse strike the wall beside his head, smearing a trail of blood down to the floor. The screams of the other survivors were quickly cut short.

Borodin was alone.

He waited and listened. The tyrannosaurs were snorting heavily, crunching and swallowing their morsels. A few men moaned their

death rattles beneath them, and the collider hummed with its building energy. The light within its chassis was almost blinding. Borodin watched from around the corner of the collider as the two tyrannosaurs each took a mouthful of humans and tromped outside. Borodin listened to the rain falling through the front of the building.

Once Borodin was sure that the leviathan carnivores were gone, he threw open the side door and sprinted outside. He ran along the perimeter wall, towards his office. If he could get to a radio, he could call for help from Con Nhen and the Viet Cong, or possibly an evac from the other Russian forces further north. He needed to escape.

Borodin came to the massive hole where the Father Tyrannosaurus had broken through the perimeter wall, and he stopped in his tracks. The two tyrannosaurs were nuzzling their surviving chick in the center of the compound, near the front gate. Borodin felt his knees go weak and his bladder released. The shock hit him like a jolt of electricity. He was paralyzed; eyes wide and lips trembling at the brink of a scream.

There was a soft hiss from beneath the undergrowth outside of the gap in the perimeter wall. Borodin glanced in the direction of the sound, and he froze.

Sergei was crouched amongst the ferns and palm fronds. He aimed his AK-47 at Borodin's face.

Borodin shook his head roughly, *no*.

Sergei nodded. He didn't show any emotion.

The AK-47 screamed to life, and bullets struck the wall of the building behind Borodin's head with an ear-piercing clatter.

Borodin dove forward and scrambled to his feet, right into the line of sight of the two tyrannosaurs. The chick trotting beneath their feet squealed in surprise, and the Mother moved to protect it.

Borodin stared. The Father Tyrannosaurus stood in front of his family and roared. Blood flurried from his yawning mouth. Borodin saw shredded flesh hanging from the behemoth's teeth. He couldn't will himself to move.

The Father Tyrannosaurus lowered his head, opened his jaws, and charged with an explosive scream. Borodin shrieked and sprinted towards Sergei.

Sergei had his rifle aimed at Borodin, but he was watching the rapidly approaching Father Tyrannosaurus. It was like watching an

earthquake approach; the world shook and waved around the beast. Sergei saw Borodin's mouth stretched open in a scream, only a meter away, with the Father Tyrannosaurus only a few feet behind. Sergei rolled out of the way, and Borodin trampled past.

The heavy feet of the Father Tyrannosaurus crashed through the foliage beside Sergei, tearing the vegetation out of the soil between his talons. Sergei watched as Borodin sprinted downhill and the Father Tyrannosaurus plowed through the forest after him. The Mother Tyrannosaurus followed them out with the chick trotting like a dog beside her.

The unified howling of the animals drifted further downhill, until Sergei found he was listening to the echoing chaos alone. The trees swayed in the wake of the pursuit. Sergei faintly heard Borodin's panicked screams, and he sighed placidly.

Sergei stood above the undergrowth and walked back into the compound. The clearing was silent except for the rain and the pulsations of the collider.

His mission wasn't over yet.

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT – RYAN BAKER

The remaining men of Vulture Squad stood in a silent procession at the edge of the boiling river, waiting for the Father Vulture to arrive. Ryan stared into the roiling fog that had settled upon the water's surface. He was entombed by mist, hidden from the sight of his friends. He could feel their presence around him, but he felt alone in the void.

Ryan saw the foaming mouth of the river as a window. He could see his past within the dark, tormented waters, his mistakes wrought to life in the distorted reflection of his vacant eyes. The sounds of the storm swallowed his mind.

Ryan could almost feel the blood-slick steel of dog tags in his hand. He remembered the quick sting of a needle in his arm, and the release of his consciousness slipping away to the peace of oblivion. The screams of his friends coursed through his skull. The broken visages of his men seemed to stare from beneath the rolling waves. Ryan felt that if he waded into the vicious current, he would be pulled beneath the undertow by the clawing hands of the men that he had failed. Gerald, Logan, Miller, McNeil and the other past members of Vulture Squad would drag him back to where he deserved to be; the final resting place of his failure.

A face materialized over the shoulder of Ryan's reflection. He felt a hand on his back, and he turned to see Eli's burnt and bruised face. His once-childish demeanor had vanished entirely. The twenty-two year old was suddenly a miserable old man with a pummeled mask that betrayed his youth. The men shared brief eye contact, and Eli slunk back into the depths of the fog.

Ryan turned his eyes to the sky. The filthy, grease-stained clouds had developed cancerous lesions of seeping darkness. Night was fast approaching. Ryan felt the raw bite marks on the back of his ankle and he thought of the slaughtered remnants of the guerrillas outside of the Viet Cong camp. He shivered; the Russians were the least of his worries.

The thumping of rotor blades interrupted Ryan's thoughts. He lifted his head and watched as the Father Vulture sifted through the fog of the river like a dark chariot. The door to the cabin slid open and the helicopter descended beside the bank. Leon stood in the doorway, leaning with his hand held out. He looked just as old as Eli, Ryan thought.

The men hopped into the helicopter, one after another, until Ryan came in last. He pulled the door shut behind them, and the interior was suspended in silence.

As the helicopter rose above the landscape of fog, Ryan looked over the other men inside of the cabin. Bishop and the Black Ops team looked apathetic to what they had seen. Ozzie showed the only sign of remorse; a grimace was stretched across his grizzled face. Ryan nodded to Bishop and sat down across from Leon.

The young rookie was mute; his eyes were dull with the remnants of morphine. Ryan recognized it immediately. He reached out and put a hand on Leon's shoulder, but Leon brushed it off and looked out the window.

Faint light glowed through the concrete painted across the rain-lashed windows. As the helicopter swam through the rolling clouds, faint glimpses of the forested hills slipped through the mist. In the distance, at the northern edge of the valley, a bright light shimmered from a crevice in the mountain walls. Ryan sat up in his seat and nudged Andrei.

The decrepit scientist slid over and peered through the window. He brushed his frayed straw hair out of his eyes and adjusted the splintered glasses on the edge of his nose. His eyes pressed into tight creases. He let out a low whistle.

"That would be the collider," Andrei said. "And by the looks of it, it's got just about a full charge. Borodin must be preparing to test-fire it right about now."

Ryan nodded and stuck his head into the cockpit. Ricardo, the pilot, was struggling to steer the craft through the haze.

"See that light, Ricardo? One o'clock. Bright blue."

"Rodger that," Ricardo replied. "I see it."

"Head towards that, and set us down at least a mile away," Ryan said.

"You got it, captain," Ricardo said.

Ryan pulled his head out of the cockpit and sat back down. Beside him, Andrei was visibly anxious. He threaded his fingers through his knuckles and tapped his boots on the floor.

"This is bad," Andrei said softly. "This is really bad."

"Don't worry," Ryan said. "We'll stop it."

"It could be any minute now, Ryan," Andrei said. "Any minute now, Borodin hits that switch and we could potentially have another worm-hole, or even a black-hole. We don't know what all the repercussions of activating that machine could be. God only knows what lies beyond our perceptible reality."

"Nothing," Leon mumbled. "There's nothing."

"Don't say that," Eli said.

"*Hypocrite*," Leon grunted. "Your own words, Eli."

"Guys, stop it," Ryan said. "We need to keep it together. We're almost there."

"Correction," Ricardo called back. "We're already here."

Ryan looked out the window and saw the fog clearing as the helicopter descended onto a small glade surrounded by thick jungle. The helicopter's rotor blades slowed to a halt and the steady rainfall resounded throughout the metal hull. Bishop stood by the door and the rest of the black ops team gathered their gear.

"We're going to scout ahead, do a little recon," Bishop said. He straightened the green bandana over his mouth and held his AK-47. "We'll be back in a few minutes. Gather your thoughts and we'll make a plan when we get back."

"Got it," Ryan said. "Good luck."

Bishop saluted and threw the door open. The four men hopped into the chest-high grass and sprinted through the storm with their rifles held high. Ryan stood and closed the door, shutting off the roar of the wind and rain. The men were entombed again in cold, dark

silence.

Ryan faced the few men he had left and sucked through his teeth. His clenched fists were shaking. In one hand was his old compass, with the name 'McNeil' carved into its surface. He raised his other hand to his face and hooked his fingers through his mask. He felt the ragged scars beneath his fingernails and shuddered. The rest of the men were staring at him now.

"You okay?" Xavier asked. His eyes were wide, yet vacant. His paranoia had broken his once-brave exterior. It made Ryan sick to his stomach to see how far his friend had fallen because of his fear. "Sit down, boss," Eli said. His southern twang had been reduced to a scratched whisper that bled from the back of his throat. It reminded Ryan of Logan, and he felt a pang in his chest. Andrei and Nguyen were silent. Andrei was gripping his gut in pain, and Nguyen was trembling with a thousand-yard stare. Ryan watched them and turned to Leon, who wouldn't even look him in the eyes.

Ryan wanted to scream at them. He wanted to purge their weakness, but more than anything, he wanted to hurt himself for not helping them maintain their strength. With a deep breath, he started tugging on his mask.

"You all need to understand, I've been trying my best," Ryan said. His voice was shaking. "I know I'm not as good as I could be, and I've fucked up a lot. I've gotten you all hurt and I never wanted that to happen. I just want you all to know that I've gone through what you've gone through, and everything will be okay. All of you are strong. You *will* survive."

Leon glanced at Ryan. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I've done things, horrible things," Ryan said. "I've gotten people killed. I've been an addict, and I've killed innocent people. I wasn't made captain of this squad because I was special; I was picked for this job because I was all there was left of my last team."

Ryan tightened his fist around the compass.

"Back when I was just a rookie, when I was working for Captain McNeil, we went on a mission for General Jericho. It was supposed to be simple; find some missing soldiers behind enemy lines, just like this. But it was the same thing; we were canaries in a coal mine. We didn't know it, but there was an NVA base nearby. Jericho knew, though. He was just using us as bait."

Ryan had their attention. He felt himself threading apart from the

inside. Smoke ran through his veins. The other men seemed visibly frightened by the sudden change in his stony demeanor. Eli and Xavier looked at each other warily. Leon was watching Ryan with his full, inebriated attention.

"My entire squad got hit by mortar fire, and everybody was badly hurt," Ryan said. "It was like we were hit by a meteor shower. The jungle was on fire, and people were screaming everywhere. My friends, my captain, everybody was crying for help. I was the only one who could even walk. I was hurt, but I could see, and I could still use my rifle. I found my squad mates, but they were in..."

Ryan's caught his breath. He tightened his fists and spoke slowly.

"They were in...different conditions. Some were missing limbs, others were dead, and others were burnt beyond recognition. All of the ones alive, though, were screaming, and there was nothing I could do. Nothing."

Ryan dragged his mask down, and Nguyen gasped. The men stared in silent shock. The emerging moonlight glistened across the ivory scar tissue of Ryan's face, and the shadows sat deep and dark in the ravines of his cheeks and sunken eye sockets. Tears glistened from the bottomless pits of his eyes. His ragged lips pulled back into a scowl, revealing chipped and fractured teeth. Leon moaned and covered his mouth.

Ryan dropped the mask and put his foot on it. His chest was heaving with a mixture of rage and despair.

"I did the only thing left," Ryan said. "I let them all go. I let them go from their misery. They begged for it. I put every one of them out, and when there was no-one left to let go, I sat amongst the bodies of my dead friends and waited for hours until an evac arrived. I was sent to a hospital, and I became a morphine addict."

"Now look at me—*look at me*. This is the price we pay to fight. We've lost Gerald, and Logan, and Miller, and everybody back at Jericho's base, but understand this- we will never let a death be in vain. We are stronger than our mistakes and failures. We are human; we will survive."

Eli was holding the crucifix from Miller's rosary between his finger and thumb. He shook his head.

"I won't let Miller's death mean nothing," he said. "Those Russians aren't going to get to use that machine."

"Gerald and Logan died fighting for us," Xavier said. "They were our brothers, and they won't be forgotten."

"My brothers died for this land," Nguyen spoke up. "They believed in this fight."

"Jericho might be a worthless pig, but this mission is bigger than all of us," Ryan said. "We can't keep everybody alive, but we can at least make sure that their sacrifices were worthwhile."

"We're destroying that collider, and we're getting out of here. We might not be who we were when we stepped into these jungles, but we can always be stronger than who we are *now*. We can be better for those that died for us, and for those that we would die for. There is no escape; only survival."

"Hoo-ah," Eli grunted. He raised his empty flask, and the others raised their canteens as well.

"Hoo-ah!" they cried. The men all took a drink, and Ryan felt his spirit finally settle. The men were still visibly anxious, but Ryan could see the life behind their eyes again. He put a hand on Leon's shoulder, and Leon gave him half a smile.

The radio hissed in the cockpit, and Ricardo took the headset.

"Rodger that," Ricardo said, listening to the static. "Really? Okay. Rodger."

"Was that Bishop?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah," Ricardo said. "He said the Russians are all gone. He wants you to meet him by the perimeter of the Russian compound."

Ryan and Xavier shared a cautious look. Ryan shouldered his rucksack and held his rifle.

"You heard him, Vultures," Ryan said. "Gather your gear. We're ending this *now*."

The silence betrayed their new-found hope.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE – REQUIEM

The dark of night overtook the jungle with the help of the storm. The black ops team moved cautiously along the perimeter wall of the Russian compound, guided only by the beam of the flashlight on the end of Bishop's rifle. Any signs of nocturnal wildlife were suppressed by the roar of rain crashing through the towering tree tops.

Bishop skimmed the towering concrete wall with the flashlight, examining the ivy that climbed over and intertwined with the

coiled razor-wire on top. He huffed vapor through his bandana and narrowed his eyes. Borodin and the Russians knew what they were doing when they built this compound, he thought.

Bishop had felt unnerved when they first went to the entrance and found the monolithic steel doors off their hinges and caving inward. The smell of entrails and vacated bowels had been diluted by the smoldering barrel fires and the ripe mud, but Bishop recognized it immediately.

The Russian compound was in a similar condition as Jericho's base had been. Bishop crept inside of the compound, saw the damage that had been done, and decided to circle around the perimeter to see if he could find any more signs of what had happened to the Russians.

As they walked, they could hear the faint drone of the collider. In some brief instances, Bishop saw the ebb and flow of the blue light shimmering through the mist above the wall. He led his team in a tight diamond-shaped formation towards the source of the light. Bishop directed his flashlight through the surrounding foliage, illuminating glistening palm fronds and ivory-white tree trunks. The storm was deafening in his skull. Thunder boomed throughout the valley. It seemed to Bishop that a monsoon was imminent.

There was a scream and flash of lightning, and Bishop heard the rain-pummeled foliage shift wildly. He heard something hit the ground, a muffled gasp, and then rain pervaded the silence. Bishop turned on his heel and pointed his flashlight between Shadow and Ozzie.

Ibex was nowhere to be found.

The ferns behind the men rustled erratically and settled. Shadow and Ozzie scanned their surroundings over the barrels of their rifles. The forest trembled beneath the rain and created a spastic hissing chorus of rustling palm fronds. Bishop's eyes were peeled open. Nobody spoke; nobody knew what to say.

Two possibilities entered Bishop's mind – Russian Spetsnaz, like the ones that had attacked Jericho's base, or dinosaurs. The only species Bishop had seen or heard of were the kaprosuchus, the triceratops, and the quetzalcoatlus that Leon had described. None of those creatures, man or beast, could have taken Ibex that quickly. For the first time in what seemed like years, Bishop felt a very real and painful terror turn his blood into ice water. He stood his ground and tore through the shadows with the beam of his flashlight.

Anywhere he directed the beam, he only saw a collage of shadows and shifting foliage. Everything seemed alive in the storm.

"On me," Bishop said. His voice was lost in the howling wind.

"Keep close; we're going inside."

"What about Ibex?" Ozzie said. He nearly had to shout.

"He's gone," Bishop said.

"But--"

"*He's gone*," Bishop snapped. "We need to get inside the compound. Let's move."

Hesitantly, the men moved forward. It was difficult traversing the undergrowth; they could scarcely see the roots spread out beneath the vegetation, and the rain disoriented them. Bishop hurried through the brush, following what seemed to be an endless wall of concrete. He swung the AK-47 left and right, directing the flashlight beam from the rifle barrel across the tops of the shining elephant-ear leaves and king ferns.

Bishop felt a quick stab of regret over circling the perimeter wall instead of turning around and heading back the way they came, but he had a feeling whatever had taken Ibex would have cut them off anyway. He hoped that he could at least keep a line of fire from all directions, so long as Ozzie watched their back and Shadow protected their exposed flank.

Bishop had to squint against the stinging droplets that struck his brow. He caught another log with his boot and he cursed beneath his breath.

Bishop heard another gasp, and a heavy impact struck the wall behind him. Bishop turned on his heel as he heard Ozzie scream. The heavy Stoner-63 machine gun in Ozzie's hands barked to life. Bishop aimed his flashlight and was startled to see a mass of vegetation where Shadow had been. Swinging the light, Bishop saw that the vegetation seemed to be wrapped around the frame of a large animal. The circle of light jittered across the creature's feathered body and Bishop's mouth fell open.

Shadow was ensnared in the reptilian jaws of a large, bird-like animal. The talons of the predator's winged forearms were hooked through Shadow's abdomen. Blood seeped through the gaping mouth of his ski-mask, and his hands clutched feebly at the long snout. Bishop caught sight of the creature's golden eyes staring directly into his own. Ozzie screamed and opened fire from behind the animal, snapping Bishop out of his shock.

Bishop screamed and pulled the trigger of his AK-47, but the utahraptor and Shadow were both gone in the brief flashes of muzzle-flare. He aimed his light towards the darkness of the jungle beyond and fired a few more rounds, but it was a vain effort. The predator had already dissipated amongst the banana trees and drooping vines.

Bishop and Ozzie stood side-by-side, panting, their backs pressed against the wall with their rifles aimed at the darkness beyond. The utahraptor hadn't made a sound. It had taken Shadow in what seemed to be mere seconds.

Warmth dripped down the back of Bishop's neck from the blood splashed across the concrete wall. There was a blast of thunder, and Bishop flinched. He accidentally fired a round into the brush from his shock. Ozzie was practically clinging to his arm.

They remained frozen where they stood, panting and shaking, listening to the storm. Bishop wanted to scream; he felt helpless. He distantly hoped that Vulture Squad was on their way. They had more experience with the dinosaurs; they could fight off these monsters of the night.

Bishop felt Ozzie's fingers squeeze into his wrist, but he didn't speak.

"Bishop," Ozzie whispered.

He stared into the shadowy jungle, entranced.

"*Bishop!*" Ozzie hissed.

Bishop felt Ozzie's fingers tighten around his jaw, and his head was pushed to the left. In the darkness beyond, a pair of amber eyes glowed in the underbrush.

Bishop became transfixed; he shivered. He had heard stories of soldiers catching sight of tigers in the night. They hypnotized you, dragged your soul out of your body, and once your instinct to run kicked in, it was too late. It already had you.

Bishop understood the feeling. His legs were buckling; his heart ricocheted off his ribcage and he felt nauseous from adrenaline. Ozzie was still clinging onto him, practically holding him upright. Bishop had never known such terror. He felt sick.

"Bishop, do something," Ozzie hissed.

Bishop remembered being a child.

The tight fingers that clenched Bishop's face were suddenly wrenched away. He felt himself being pulled backward, and he hit the ground. Ozzie made a gurgling sound and a scream so high in

pitch that it seemed to be a trick of the ear, an illusion or something imagined. Steaming blood splashed across Bishop's body, and he covered his face from Ozzie's kicking boots.

Something hot and rubbery fell onto Bishop and coiled over his neck. He snapped out of his stupor and fought against the serpents, clawing at the slippery flesh. The coils tugged, and Bishop was dragged by his throat. There was a flash of lightning, and he screamed.

Glistening grey intestines spilled from Ozzie's abdomen onto Bishop as the utahraptor tore through Ozzie's abdomen. Bishop gagged into his bandana and scrambled to get away, but a sudden flare of pain overtook his foot and paralyzed him. He was wrenched roughly backward, dragged through the mud, and he felt the fat, coiled serpents slither over his face. He wretched again, and screamed as talons stripped the flesh from his back.

There was another flash of lightning, and Bishop saw the silhouette of a dinosaur standing over Ozzie, organs strung like fleshy bulbs from its jaws. He lost consciousness.

The storm howled.

Sergei tilted his head back to watch the webs of lightning stretch and flare across the starless night sky. He listened to the thumping heartbeat of the collider through the pattering rain.

For a brief instant, he thought he had heard somebody screaming. Possibly it was Borodin, or one of the remaining Russian soldiers in the throes of death. Sergei didn't concentrate on the sound for long. He raised his Dragunov and crept along the smoldering barrel fires towards Borodin's quarters.

Sergei's work was far from over.

The previous two days swirled through his mind. The death of his friends replayed in a looping trance within his mind, but his thoughts had become occupied with the carnage he had wrought on the Americans. He no longer felt the sensation of cold air beneath his skin, or a bottomless pit contained within his ribcage. Whatever Sergei had lost internally had been replaced by a poisonous toxin that seeped from his bones and bore through his flesh. His body was trembling, and his animal-heart had become weak.

A slew of emotions swam through Sergei's spirit; regret, guilt, self-loathing, despair, anguish, horror, hatred, spite. He tried to hold his fractured pieces together as he opened the door to Borodin's office

and stepped inside.

General Jericho was still on the floor. His hands and feet were bound together behind him, but he had managed to either roll or crawl behind Borodin's desk. His eyes were huge and fearful, like Sergei's had been when Tolstoy first died.

Sergei felt a stab of pain, and something dripped through his ribs. He crouched in front of Jericho and shouldered the Dragunov. He raised his hands to show he was unarmed. Jericho whimpered through his gag and tried to crawl away.

For the first time in days, Sergei looked at his own body. He was covered in a second-skin of filth, caked blood, and nearly septic wounds. He put his hands on the floor and looked into Jericho's eyes.

"I-I'm sorry," Sergei said. "I'm going to take that rag out of your mouth, but please, don't yell at me. Just listen. Okay? Don't yell at me. Please-please don't make me angry."

There was recognition in Jericho's eyes. He nodded.

Sergei took the rag out of Jericho's mouth. Jericho gasped for air.

"Okay," Sergei said. "Now listen. I've done horrible things to you and your people. I was tricked into doing this. I have no reason to harm you. I don't want to hurt you."

"You filthy fucking dogshit," Jericho spat, "You're a fucking murderer, you goddamned heathen! You killed so many of my men, you and your friend-"

Sergei snatched Jericho's throat in his hand. He constricted the windpipe and glared with pure malice into Jericho's eyes. Jericho's eyes bugged out and he choked.

"I said, *don't yell*," Sergei growled. "I'm trying to help."

Sergei let go, and Jericho struggled to catch his breath.

"I once had a friend named Aleksandr...he died because of these monsters that Borodin let loose in this valley," Sergei said. He saw Aleksandr's gaping stomach wound, and he exhaled slowly, trying to usher the memory away.

"Aleksandr told me that there is no black and white, no good or evil," Sergei said. He thought of staring across the valley beneath a full moon with Aleksandr, and he almost smiled. "My friend told me that there are only shades of grey; you might help one man, while hurting another. I thought I was helping, but I was only hurting. I want to change that."

"Whatever you do won't bring back the boys you killed, you fucking

animal,” Jericho wheezed.

Sergei ground his teeth. “Do you want my help or not?”

“How could *you* possibly help me?” Jericho grunted.

“Borodin’s collider is still charging,” Sergei said. “It might go off at any second. I don’t know how it works, or what will happen when it goes off, but it’s going to any minute now. If I untie you, will you come and help me to destroy it?”

Jericho nodded.

“You better hope you deactivate it before my men find you,”

Jericho said. “You don’t want to be here when they arrive-”

“YOU!”

Jericho and Sergei both snapped their heads to the doorway. They saw a flash of green, and Sergei was thrown into the wall.

Leon straddled Sergei, tightening his hands around the Russian’s throat. Sergei coughed and tightened his hands around Leon’s wrists. The other members of Vulture Squad came shouting through the doorway.

Jericho barked at Leon, but his voice was lost in the din. Sergei recognized the look of pure malice in Leon’s eyes, and he started to scream through his constricted vocal chords.

“*Come on!*” Sergei shrieked. “Get it over with!”

“Get off of him, Leon!” Ryan shouted.

Xavier and Eli tried pulling Leon off, but even in his morphine-induced state, he was still too strong. Leon bellowed and slammed Sergei’s head against the concrete floor. Sergei screamed and clawed at Leon’s face.

Leon held Sergei’s throat in one hand and pounded his face with the other. Ryan caught Leon’s swinging fist and dragged him off. Xavier and Eli leveled their rifles to Sergei’s forehead as Ryan pulled Leon across the room.

“He’s a fucking *murderer!*” Leon screamed. “He killed Susan and the Rangers!”

“He’s trying to help,” Jericho boomed from the floor. “He wants to help us destroy the collider. We can worry about making him pay for his crimes later.”

“There’s plenty of time for me to pay,” Sergei rasped. “Just let me help.”

“No, you don’t deserve to live for even a *second*,” Leon howled.

“You killed the only innocent person in this valley! You need to pay; *you have to die!*”

“Leon, keep it together,” Ryan said. “We have work to do. You want to be like this guy? Just another monster? You’re better than him. Don’t let this become who you are.”

Leon and Sergei glared at each other, two young rookies reflected in each other’s eyes. Leon growled and fought in Ryan’s grip.

Ryan pulled Leon to his feet. Eli and Xavier kept their rifles on Sergei, and Nguyen untied Jericho’s ropes. Andrei huddled behind Ryan, peering out through the blinds of the window.

“Where’s Bishop and his team?” Ryan asked. “We couldn’t find them anywhere.”

“What team?” Sergei asked. “I haven’t seen anybody since the dinosaurs attacked.”

“What kind of dinosaurs?” Andrei asked, looking over his shoulder.

“Big ones, really big, with green feathers, and little arms,” Sergei said. “Big as houses.”

“Tyrannosaurus,” Andrei said, looking at Ryan. “Bishop must have arrived after they attacked.”

“Lovely,” Ryan sighed.

Andrei looked at Sergei. “Are you sure you didn’t see any other men or animals around here?”

“No,” Sergei said, shaking his head. Jericho shook his head as well.

“Then where the hell is he?” Ryan asked.

Andrei tugged on Ryan’s arm. Ryan looked over his shoulder, and Andrei pointed through the open doorway. Through the darkness of the storm, Ryan could see the busted-open steel doors of the gate. A single golden eye stared back.

Ryan felt the hairs on his neck stand on end. He raised his rifle.

“I think that’s our answer,” Ryan said.

Three more sets of eyes blinked open at the gate. Lightning flashed, and Ryan saw the Cyclops standing with the rest of the utahraptor pack. Their feathers were drenched and glistening in the reflection of lightning.

The Cyclops raised its head, and it released a horrendous scream that drowned out the roar of thunder. The other three utahraptors joined the call, and the valley seemed to be filled by the echoing shriek. Ryan shuddered, and Sergei covered his ears. The other men clutched their rifles and crowded around the doorway.

“There are only four of them?” Sergei asked.

“Yeah, only four,” Andrei said.

The flash of lightning subsided, and the golden eyes were

suspended in darkness. A dozen more pairs of eyes suddenly blinked open throughout the compound. The predators were silent as they stared at the small group of men. Ryan's jaw fell open and he nearly dropped his CAR-15 rifle. Eli choked on his chewing tobacco. "...But I've been wrong before," Andrei muttered. Ryan stared as the golden eyes drifted closer.

CHAPTER FORTY – FATE

"I thought you said there were only *four*!?" Ryan hissed.

"That-that's the only amount that I ever saw hunting at night," Andrei stammered. "I always feared that there would have been more; females, chicks, things like that. I was afraid that there might have been a colony. By the looks of it, there are almost ten of them out there, maybe more. Probably all males. They might have a nesting-site nearby."

The men had barricaded the door, and were staring out through the window beside it. Ryan watched as the yellow eyes glided like lightning-bugs through the darkness. Occasionally, one of the utahraptors would saunter beside a smoldering barrel fire, and he would see the fire reflected in the shimmering green feathers on their flanks.

The animals were investigating the compound, sniffing around the gore spread across the mud. Some of the dinosaurs took the salvageable remains of the slain men in their arms and turned back towards the jungle.

"It looks like they're scavenging," Ryan said. "Have you ever seen behavior like that?"

"I told you, I don't like to follow these things around," Andrei said. He squinted and adjusted his glasses. "But yes, they must be making the most of this meal."

"So what do we do?" Sergei asked.

"I suppose we'll have to wait it out," Ryan said. "Hope they go away soon."

"We can't afford to wait; that collider could go off any minute and create a real hell of a problem," Andrei said.

"You don't call that a hell of a problem out there already?" Xavier asked, looking from the window to Andrei. "We've got two men in

here that were mauled by those things. I'm sure they're after more than just dead bodies."

"Since when was the commie the brave one?" Eli muttered.

"I'm not a communist, you *drunk*," Andrei said.

"You bicker like children," Sergei said.

"Shut up, commie," Eli grunted.

"Everybody, shut up," Ryan said. He looked outside. "Sergei, how many dead bodies are out there? It looks like the utahraptors already got most of them from the front-side of the compound."

"There were dozens, comrade," Sergei said. "They died defending the collider from the bigger dinosaurs, the ones with the little arms."

"Tyrannosaurs," Andrei said. "Maybe the scent of the tyrannosaurs will deter the utahraptors from going near the collider. Either way, it looks like all the utahraptors have their arms full. Look-" he pointed. "They're leaving."

Ryan watched as the last of the utahraptors trotted through the gates and into the jungle. There were no more golden eyes glowing in the dark, but Ryan couldn't get his nerves under control. He took a deep breath and gripped his rifle.

"Sergei, can you lead us to the collider?" Ryan asked.

"Da," Sergei grunted.

"Okay," Ryan said. "Sergei, you and I will lead the way. Jericho and Andrei, you stay behind us. Leon and Xavier, get our sides. Eli and Nguyen, watch our back. We'll move in a tight diamond straight to the collider. No stopping once we're outside, and no slowing down. We can't risk getting separated. We have no idea how long we have until those dinosaurs come back, so let's make this quick."

The men checked their rifles briefly, reloading their magazines and zeroing the sights. Ryan gave Andrei his Colt M1911 pistol and took an AK-47 from the corner and gave it to Nguyen. Sergei gave Jericho his own sidearm and put a new clip into his Dragunov.

The men were silent, the small room filled with the clack of brass and metal. Eli pushed his thumb against the dent in his flask and took a deep breath.

Once the men were ready, they cleared the barricade and lined up at the door behind Ryan and Sergei. Ryan looked each man in the eyes, ignoring his reflection in their dilated pupils. He held his CAR-15 rifle in one hand and held the door handle in the other. "Remember; fast, and silent," Ryan said. "Just like those...things." The group nodded with various amounts of nervous twitches. Ryan opened the door and stepped into the frigid rain. His boots sank almost shin-deep into the mud. He growled and tugged himself free. He hadn't thought of how the mired earth would affect their pace.

With a quick flick of his finger, he switched on the flashlight at the end of his barrel and illuminated the puddle of blood his boots had been sucked into. Ryan clenched his teeth and kicked his way out. Sergei, adapted to lurking in the pitch black, walked past the reach of Ryan's light and waved him forward. Ryan raised the CAR-15 and followed.

They moved as quickly as they could through the muck. As Ryan scanned his surroundings with the flashlight, he noticed that there were still plenty of partial corpses for the utahraptors to come back and claim. He kept checking over his shoulder to confirm that the rest of the men were still with him. He knew how easy it would be to lose the others to the utahraptors, especially with the storm obscuring all of their senses.

Ryan felt like he was moving through an abyss. He couldn't hear or smell, and he could barely see his own light in the engulfing rainfall. He didn't know how Sergei was able to move through it so unabated.

After walking through a stand of splintered and fractured tree trunks, Ryan caught a whiff of the Father Tyrannosaurus's familiar musk. Then, he heard it; the steady hum of the collider. There was a large flash of blue light from across the clearing, illuminating a massive breach in the front of a building and the numerous shapes of dead bodies strewn before it.

Ryan saw Sergei scramble around the corpses and towards the building. He cursed under his breath and glanced at Leon; he could sense the young man's seething hate.

Ryan side-stepped the mutilated corpses and approached the entrance to the collider. The construct seemed to emanate heat, creating a thick mist around its glistening glass and steel chassis. The soft blue light blinked through the porthole windows in time with the increasing volume of the droning machinery.

Ryan cautiously walked through the rubble and stepped into the fog within the building. He craned his head, noting the stairs along the back-wall that led to a catwalk above the collider, towards a ladder on the opposite end of the building. Ryan assumed the ladder provided an exit to the roof. Perhaps there was a helipad on top of the building.

Sergei stood before the collider, a black silhouette in the mist. He held the Dragunov in his hands and turned to peer through the scope outside of the building. Andrei walked past him and started pacing around the room, examining the control panels that ringed the collider.

Leon glared at Sergei as he followed Andrei. He had nearly fifty pounds of explosives from the armory in his rucksack, and he was ready to put his explosive ordinance expertise to work.

Andrei went to the console at the front of the machine and started turning dials. He cursed and grumbled.

“What’s wrong?” Ryan asked. He came across the room to Andrei’s side.

“It’s set to automatically discharge,” Andrei said.

Eli cleared his throat.

“I’ll have to take this console apart and do some rewiring,” Andrei continued. “Might take a few minutes, but I can get it done, no problem.”

“Alright, get it done fast,” Ryan said. “Leon, start hooking up the C4.”

Leon nodded and took the plastic bricks from his rucksack. He shouldered his rifle and started attaching the blocks of C4 to the steel body of the collider. Andrei quickly dismantled the front cover of the console and tinkered with the wires that filled the box. Ryan felt a headache coming on just watching Andrei work; it was mind-numbingly tedious. He walked through the haze towards the others.

Xavier, Eli, Sergei, and Nguyen were standing guard at the breach in the front wall. They had their rifles aimed out towards the darkness beyond the reach of the collider’s pulsing light. Jericho sat

on a piece of concrete debris behind them, his head in his hands. Ryan took off his rucksack and dropped it in front of him.

"Here, make yourself useful," Ryan said. "My radio is in there. Call Ricardo, have him come here and pick us up. It shouldn't take him more than a couple minutes to get here. I think there's a helipad on the roof of this building he can land on."

Jericho sighed and took the radio out of the backpack.

"This entire mission has been a shit-show," Jericho muttered. "You know, we have these machines, too, back in the states. The Pentagon had spies involved in finding this collider, back when it was in Moscow, and they wanted me to spearhead this operation to seize the technology. We were just trying to keep Russia down and continue to one-up them in this arms-race. I never thought it would have come to this."

"This entire war has been a shit-show, Jericho," Ryan said. "It has to end."

"I was supposed to seize this technology, not destroy it, Baker," Jericho said.

"You're not the one making orders anymore, Jericho. I don't see you leading."

Jericho sighed, and put the headset of the radio to his ear.

"Escalation is the name of the game, Baker. This won't end with the destruction of this machine. It's just going to keep getting worse from here on out, I can promise you that."

"You can worry about the future when we get out of this shit-hole," Ryan said. "First, we have to ensure we'll even have a future to worry about."

Ryan walked up to Sergei while Jericho spoke to Ricardo on the radio. The buzzing rain mixed with the hum of the collider. In the brief flashes of blue light, they saw the clearing dance with shadows and shimmering rainfall. Ryan narrowed his eyes and aimed his rifle at the darkness beyond the light's reach. Sergei took a deep breath and sighed. The men were silent and tense, otherwise.

"I got it!" Andrei shouted. There was a quick *snip* of a knife cutting through thin wires, and the pulsing blue light suddenly ceased entirely. The building was cast in darkness. Ryan felt his heart jump in his throat and he turned his flashlight back on.

"Andrei, can we get any kind of light in here?" Ryan said.

"Yeah, hold on," Andrei said. He fumbled with some switches, and emergency flood lights switched on inside of the building. They

were a dim, bloody red, scarcely lighting the thick fog that had settled inside of the building. Ryan ground his teeth and skimmed the clearing outside with his flashlight. He only saw mangled bodies and fallen trees in the swinging beam.

"Can you get any lights on outside?" Ryan asked.

"No, but I'm not sure it would do us any good," Andrei said. "It would be like ringing a dinner bell for the utahraptors, whenever they come back."

"What are you talking about?" Xavier said. "You might be a scientist, but you're not a predator, like those things out there. I don't think you realize, but we *are* the dinner bell. They're out there."

"I think you're being paranoid, Xave's," Eli said. "...Which is understandable."

"Leon, give me a flare," Xavier called over his shoulder.

"I'm busy," Leon shouted back.

"What part of 'quiet' do you guys not understand?" Ryan asked.

Jericho stood beside Xavier and handed the rucksack back to Ryan.

"Ricardo said his ETA is ten minutes," Jericho said. "He said he has to be careful in this wind."

"Okay, everybody," Ryan said. "There's a set of stairs on the other side of the collider that leads to a catwalk. If we follow the catwalk to the right-corner of the room, we can climb the ladder to the roof, and then we can wait for Ricardo there. We're going to be fine."

"Not so fast," Jericho said. He took a flare and handed it to Xavier.

"Let's see what the hunter has to show us."

Xavier snapped the end off of the flare, and there was a brilliant surge of crimson light. He tossed the flare over-hand into the storm, and the ball of sputtering sparks sailed across the clearing. The flare cast shadows from the clumps of foliage around the building, and tumbled to the edge of the trees at the other end of the clearing. The flare was quickly smothered beneath a taloned foot.

The men froze in place.

"Did you see all those bushes before?" Eli whispered.

"No," Ryan said.

"What do we do?" Nguyen asked.

Ryan chewed on his lower lip, his pulse pounding in his ears. The CAR-15 rifle rattled in his hands. Without speaking, he slowly backed away from the opening in the side of the building. The other men followed his lead and started backing towards the collider.

Ryan glanced over his shoulder, up at the catwalk. With a quick flick of his wrist, he directed the men to move left. They started to side-step through the decimated concrete, along the body of the collider, keeping their rifles directed towards the breach in the wall. Their shuffling seemed loud in the building. The scrape of concrete on concrete resonated loudly through the monotonous rainfall. Once the men cleared past the rubble, Ryan saw the first of the utahraptors slink through the glowing-red fog of the building. The silhouette of the creature was ten feet high, the body so long that the tip of its tail was still outside. Ryan waved Andrei and Jericho past, and they scampered ahead of him. Ryan turned on his heel and started walking backwards, his rifle still aimed at the large dromaeosaurid.

The utahraptor seemed to be struggling to see in the fog; it lifted its long neck and sniffed the air heavily, blowing the mist from its nostrils.

Ryan glanced at Eli and saw the Ithaca shotgun aimed at the creature's snout. They shared brief eye contact, and Ryan shook his head.

The men backed away slowly. The utahraptor was focused on the collider.

"Alright, that's the last of it," Leon shouted.

The utahraptor snapped its head to the right and saw Leon standing frozen on the other side of the room. Leon screamed and turned to run, but the utahraptor was too fast. The utahraptor sprang to its feet with a scream and sailed through the air towards him.

"Now!" Ryan shouted.

Eli fired the shotgun and caught the utahraptor's tail with a slug. Ryan and Xavier opened fire as well, and bullets screamed through the corridor. The utahraptor slammed against the wall, yowling; the tip of its tail had been blown off. The creature quickly kicked off of the wall and bounded around the collider after Leon.

Ryan and the others sprinted clockwise around the collider, hoping to cut off the utahraptor from Leon. Over his shoulder, Ryan saw the silhouettes of three more utahraptors sifting through the burgundy fog. The Cyclops saw him and shrieked.

"The stairs!" Ryan yelled. "Run to the stairs, Leon!"

Ryan sprinted after Sergei through intermittent shadows and blinking red lights. Behind him, Xavier and Eli fired sporadic shots at the pursuing utahraptors. Sergei ran past Andrei and Jericho with

his Dragunov raised. He came to a stop in front of the stairs and waved them forward.

“Go, go!” Sergei yelled. Suddenly, he was knocked off of his feet, with Leon on top of him. A howling utahraptor pounced over their heads and landed between them and Ryan.

Ryan skidded to a stop and fired several shots at the utahraptor’s snout. The utahraptor shrieked and swung its tail, slinging blood across Ryan’s face. Ryan sputtered and stepped back into Eli. Eli had his back turned to Ryan; he had his Ithaca aimed at the Cyclops, which was creeping around the corner of the collider behind them.

They were trapped between the two predators.

Eli’s Ithaca went off with a powerful *thoom*, and the Cyclops ducked behind the collider. Xavier took a grenade from his belt, but Ryan quickly halted him.

“You set off that C4, and we’re all going to die,” Ryan said.

The utahraptor that stood between Ryan and Sergei snarled, vibrating the air around them. It blocked everybody from the stairs to the catwalk. Andrei and Jericho were already running across the catwalk to the ladder.

The utahraptor raised its head to the clanging footsteps and growled again, puffing its feathers out. Ryan glanced from the utahraptor to the corner the Cyclops had vanished behind.

While the utahraptor was distracted, the men opened fire. The utahraptor was caught in the crossfire and yowled again. It charged at Leon, but Sergei jumped in the way. The utahraptor’s jaws slammed shut over Sergei’s arms, and it shook its head like a dog as he screamed in pain. Leon crawled away from the predator to the stairs.

“Go!” Sergei howled. “*Get out of here!*”

Ryan, Eli, and Xavier quickly pulled Leon to his feet and they climbed the stairs to the catwalk. Ryan turned to open fire on the utahraptor, but he saw the Cyclops climbing on top of the collider, watching Andrei and Jericho sprinting across the catwalk. Ryan slammed the butt of his CAR-15 against the railing and fired a few rounds at the animal.

“Over here!” Ryan shouted, “Come and get it!”

The Cyclops saw him and bellowed; Ryan felt the courage drain from his marrow. The Cyclops jumped the fifteen feet from the top of the collider to the catwalk with effortless grace. The large

predator landed heavily between Ryan and the rest of his team. The Cyclops ducked its head and spread its arms wide, blocking Eli and Xavier from Ryan's sight. The single tawny eye stared through him. The beast's fangs glistened red from the emergency lights. Ryan backed away slowly, his CAR-15 raised. Sergei screamed from below.

Beneath them, Sergei was being thrown across the room by the second utahraptor. The other two utahraptors quickly circled him and kicked his bare body with their sickle-shaped toe claws. Long gashes were spread across Sergei's torso as he was tossed back and forth between them, each kick revealing bright white bone and pink striated flesh.

Sergei screamed in agony and crawled for the Dragunov rifle. He felt a heavy foot come down on the base of his spine, and a talon hooked through his vertebrae. There was a world-consuming *snap* of bone, an engulfing pain, and then nothing.

Sergei was paralyzed from the waist-down.

Ryan heard the *snap* and flinched. He stared at the Cyclops from over the barrel of his rifle. Xavier and Eli opened fire from the catwalk behind it.

Leon and Nguyen shot the utahraptor on top of Sergei, and Eli and Xavier tore apart the backside of the Cyclops. The Cyclops ignored them and charged towards Ryan, its arms spread wide, the jaws opening in a horrific roar.

Ryan turned and ran, felt the breath rushing up the back of his neck. The Cyclops slammed him against the catwalk floor, grating the flesh from his palms and face.

Andrei and Jericho were yelling across the room. Ryan barely heard them amongst the screams, gunshots, and the growling utahraptors. "The helicopter! The helicopter's here!"

"Go!" Ryan screamed. He elbowed the hilt of the dagger jutting from the Cyclops's eye, and it shrieked viciously. With a swipe of its talons, it split open the flesh of his back and his blood flowed freely. Ryan shrieked, and the Cyclops kicked him, sending him rolling forward.

Bullets sailed overhead and struck the Cyclops on its back. The Cyclops turned and shrieked at Eli and Xavier. They backed up beside Nguyen and Leon. Below, Sergei continued to howl in pain. They didn't want to see what the utahraptors were doing to him. "Run!" Ryan screamed. "Xavier, Eli, get everybody to the roof,

now!”

Eli fired a slug from the Ithaca and struck the Cyclops’s flank. The Cyclops stumbled backward, pushing a foot against Ryan’s thigh. Ryan barked out in pain and crawled out from beneath the predator.

“Eli, listen to me, for once in your fucking life!” Ryan yelled. “GO!”

“We can’t leave you, boss!” Eli shouted. Behind him, Xavier and Leon held their ground. Nguyen was helping Jericho and Andrei climb the ladder to the roof. They could hear the engines of the Father Vulture through the opening in the side of the building. Eli glanced over his shoulder, and he yelled to Leon, “Go, kid! Run!” Leon looked past the Cyclops at Ryan, and saw Ryan’s eyes set hard like stone. Leon nodded, saluted quickly, and turned to run. As he went to the ladder, he glanced over the catwalk railing and saw Sergei below.

Leon took a grenade from his pack and tossed it down. The grenade bounced between the utahraptors and rolled towards Sergei.

Sergei took the grenade and looked up to see Leon staring down at him. Leon nodded, and climbed the ladder to the roof. Sergei yelled after him.

“In another life, comrade!”

Ryan glanced from Sergei to Eli and Xavier. Xavier was backing away.

“Come on, Eli,” Xavier said. He pulled on Eli’s arm.

“I won’t forget you, Captain,” Eli shouted. He fired a round at the Cyclops, and it took another step back towards Ryan.

Ryan watched as Eli and Xavier ran across the catwalk to the ladder. The Cyclops roared and chased after them, but Ryan took his rifle and opened fire on the predator’s legs. The Cyclops turned around and screamed at Ryan again.

Ryan could see his life flashing through his mind as he stared into the Cyclops’s glowering eye. Sergei screamed again beneath them.

“Come on,” Ryan said, “*Come on!*”

Ryan fired a few more rounds at the Cyclops, tearing through the feathers around its neck. The Cyclops roared, shaking the catwalk, and it strode towards him. Its arms were spread like wings, the neck ducking low between its outstretched talons, the jaws splitting open.

Ryan stared past the Cyclops’s swinging legs, and he saw Eli and

Xavier one last time as they climbed the ladder to the roof. The only men left in the room were Ryan and Sergei.

With a deep breath, Ryan fought the weakness in his legs to climb to his feet. He stood his ground and stared into the eye of the Cyclops.

Ryan saw his reflection in the eye of the Cyclops, and he pounced. The Cyclops took Ryan off of his feet with stunning speed, winding him. Ryan howled and wrapped his arms around the Cyclops's neck. He dug his thumb into the Cyclops's eye and tightened his hand around the hilt of the blade jutting from the socket of the Cyclops's other eye. The Cyclops shrieked and raked its claws down Ryan's ribs, stripping flesh from bone.

Ryan's blood quickly drained down his torso, but he held on tight. The Cyclops clenched its jaws around Ryan's throat and squeezed the air out.

The pain was overwhelming; it consumed Ryan's body. He jammed his thumb the rest of the way through the utahraptor's eye, and it screeched through its teeth. He could feel the reverberating scream inside of his skull. He pushed the blade further into the Cyclops's other eye socket, and it yowled loudly.

A warm calm flowed through Ryan's body. He felt connected to the hideous beast he was entangled with.

That connection was solidified when the heavy sickle-claw on the Cyclops's foot slid through Ryan's gut and hooked into the front of his pelvic bone.

Ryan screamed with dizzying pain, and he saw the faces of his friends in a flash of white; Gerald, Logan, Miller, McNeil, Bishop and the Black Ops team, his mother and father and all of the men that he had ever laid down with his rifle, knife, or hands.

The wet warmth that flowed through Ryan's body was more intense than anything he had ever felt from morphine; it was the ultimate high. He felt his body bleed into the Cyclops, and he felt they were a single animal, formed as one. They would die together. He would make sure of that.

Ryan felt the cold steel of the dagger in the Cyclops's eye; the only inorganic thing in their embrace. He pushed the dagger with his last vestige of strength, and the light intensified. The animal he was connected to screamed powerfully, consuming the void in his mind. Ryan felt a smile finally come to his lips, and he slammed the dagger the rest of the way into the skull of the Cyclops.

Almost immediately, the scream of the animal ceased, and its leg snapped down. In that instant, the claw that was hooked through Ryan's pelvis slammed to the floor, dragging the lower half of his body with it.

Ryan became consumed by the light, the serenity, and he felt the empty space between his atoms bleeding into the open air. The border between his physical form and the surrounding space became nullified, and he found himself seamless as he faded into the light that overtook his reality.

A final sigh drifted through his lips. There was nothing left, and he was lost in the peaceful void.

There was silence.

On the roof, Eli and Xavier rounded the others up as they watched the Father Vulture descend through the storm clouds. The helicopter settled down on the helipad, and Eli waved everybody into the cabin. The rain was whipped into a cyclone by the rotor blades. Eli struggled to yell over the rushing wind.

"Come on, let's move," he said.

Leon was the last man that Eli helped inside. He looked over Leon's shoulder and saw a dark shape clambering over the edge of the building. Eli pushed Leon inside and spun his Ithaca towards the growing shape. He fired the shotgun and knocked the animal off of the building.

There was a shriek from the wounded animal, and a second utahraptor jumped from the perimeter wall onto the roof. Eli was stunned; it had made a nearly twenty-foot leap. Eli backed into the helicopter and yelled to Ricardo, "Go, get us out of here!"

The helicopter lifted into the storm, but the utahraptors were approaching rapidly. Eli and Xavier fired at the creatures prowling across the helipad.

Eli narrowed his eyes and saw a dozen pairs of eyes glowing above the perimeter walls; the rest of the colony had returned.

The utahraptors leapt onto the roof of the building and darted towards the helicopter. Eli and the others opened fire as the helicopter tilted away from the helipad.

A utahraptor pounced from the helipad and screamed through the air towards them. Eli fired a round and caught the utahraptor in the neck with a slug, but it struck the helicopter's landing skid and clawed for purchase. The helicopter swung down precariously, and

the men inside screamed.

“Hold onto my belt!” Xavier yelled.

Xavier leaned out of the open doorway and Eli held him by his belt. Xavier saw the utahraptor wrapped around the skid, its jaws and talons hooked around the metal. With a swing of his machete, Xavier chopped off the tip of the utahraptor’s snout. The animal howled in pain and plummeted a few dozen feet to the ground below.

The men heard the heavy impact, and Eli pulled Xavier back inside of the helicopter. Xavier sat down beside Leon and wiped the blood from the blade.

“I told you,” Xavier said. “I don’t like getting it stuck.”

Sergei watched as the floodlight of the helicopter scanned the interior of the building, and then drifted away as it re-entered the storm. He let go of his breath; the Americans had left. He was grateful they had managed to escape the wretched valley.

Sergei, however, did not believe he deserved that for himself. He was being gnawed apart by the utahraptors, which seemed to be drawn to his legs. He no longer felt their fangs stripping the flesh from his bones, or the snouts that ducked into his stomach to tug his innards out.

Sergei wasn’t alarmed by his impending death; he felt liberated by it. He had finally found a sense of calm within his tortured heart. The Americans were done with their mission, and he was almost done with his as well. He held the grenade Leon had thrown him, and he briefly thought of his past.

His childhood was a blur; the past few days were all that remained of his life. The dozens of rangers slaughtered, the Vietnamese boys that screamed behind his closed eyes, the gunshot that took away his hero, the howls of pain from his closest friends as they were torn apart by the creatures his motherland had unleashed.

Sergei felt nothing. He didn’t know what to expect when he finally slipped away, but he knew what he deserved.

With a flick of his wrist, he took the pin out of the grenade, and he smiled dimly at the utahraptors that were eating him alive. A snickering whisper escaped his lips.

“We’re not so different, you and I.”

The helicopter soared higher, and the remaining survivors watched

as the utahraptors covered the building that housed the collider. A grenade erupted within the building, setting off the C4, and soon the entire northern end of the compound was engulfed in a blooming cloud of fire. Eli shook his head as he watched the rain cut the clearing down to a smoldering cigarette burn in the carpet of lush jungle canopy.

With a deep breath, Eli leaned forward and slid the cabin door shut. The men were entombed in the silence of muffled rainfall and whistling wind.

Leon began to sob. Eli put an arm around his shoulder.

"It'll be okay," Eli muttered. "They're free now."

The haggard men exchanged tired eye contact. Through the opposite window, they could see an end to the storm clouds on the horizon, and brilliant sunlight melted through the black sky. Andrei and Nguyen pressed against the window.

The helicopter flew towards the sun, and the jungle below them was illuminated by the golden rays. They soared over the river, and the herds of triceratops wading in the shimmering waters below. Kaprosuchus chased stygimolochs along the river banks, and several deinonychus sang to each other from the tree tops. Andrei sighed and adjusted his glasses.

"What are you going to do to this valley?" Andrei asked, turning to Jericho.

Jericho shrugged. "I imagine several hundred thousand pounds of napalm will clean it up."

Andrei threaded his fingers together.

"It could have been a dream come true," he muttered. "Were it not for the war."

"So where are we going?" Leon asked. "There's nobody left."

"We'll go as far as our fuel will take us," Jericho said. "We're going home."

The men watched the dinosaurs pass below them. The echoing songs of the creatures filled the valley like the pouring sunlight, and the men listened in peace.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE – BORODIN

Borodin sprinted blindly through the darkness of the jungle. The depths of the forest were vast and disorienting. He didn't know where he was going; he had nowhere left to hide. He could seek shelter with Con Nhen and the Viet Cong, but only if he could find them.

Borodin had always made sure he was a safe distance from any real danger. His pawns, his useless soldiers, had failed him. There was nobody left to protect him. The only thing left keeping him alive was his own worthless heartbeat.

If Borodin could just find a way back to the Viet Cong, they would help him find his way home. He would return to Russia and report the Americans' intrusion.

A war would erupt, he was sure. He craved it. He lusted for the destruction of the bastards that had trifled with his experiment. He would make sure their land, their homes and their families would all burn in a blaze of hell fire. The collider would be built again. Russia would return to its rightful place as the dominant superpower. He prayed for it.

The earth shook. Borodin felt the footsteps of the Father Tyrannosaurus coursing through every nerve in his body. He stumbled for cover at the roots of a mighty banyan tree. Peering around the gnarled bark, he saw jagged stripes of emerging sunlight seep through the canopy onto the gargantuan body of the behemoth.

The Father Tyrannosaurus paused and sniffed the air, the feathers of its crest flickering like emeralds in the waxing light. Borodin stared, horrified. He could almost feel the powerful jaws and thick teeth crushing his bones to powder.

The Father Tyrannosaurus drew near. Its head bowed low to the ground, drawing long inhalations. The blood of Russian men was still strung from its dagger-like teeth. The powerful chest slowly expanded and contracted with each heavy breath. Borodin could feel the wind rushing through the undergrowth from its respirations.

The rich smell of copper filled the air. Borodin couldn't control his shaking body; warmth crawled from his crotch down to his legs.

The tyrannosaurus was only a few meters away. Its nostrils huffed

the morning mist. Borodin clamped a hand over his mouth to keep from screaming. His teeth ground through his tongue until blood filled his mouth. He was as good as dead, he knew. He couldn't escape his fate.

With a distressed moan, the tyrannosaurus turned away and moved deeper into the forest. Borodin watched in shock as the massive predator trotted away, shaking the tree tops with each step.

Borodin could hardly contain his delirious laughter once the behemoth was gone. He rolled onto his side and gasped, overwhelmed by his good fortune.

Yes, god was watching. Russia would rise again.

Fetid breath washed over Borodin's neck, and a set of jaws ensnared his throat before he could scream. His head was twisted around until his vision faded. A utahraptor stared into his eyes with cold malice.

Borodin's bowels released. He clawed helplessly at the utahraptor's thick skin.

The utahraptor hissed and slid its claws through Borodin's stomach. He choked on a scream as his entrails were draped over his waist. The utahraptor pulled Borodin into its chest. Borodin flailed as he was carried away into the depths of the jungle, until he sank away to blissful unconsciousness.

When Borodin awoke, he was first aware of innumerable animals snorting, squawking, and howling. Then, he was aware of intense, blinding pain. He screamed and thrashed, but his wrists were held in jaws like vice grips. Teeth dug through the flesh of his forearms and broke his carpal bones. When the utahraptors sensed he was struggling, they bit harder.

Borodin felt the bones in his forearms snap like broken branches. He wailed and the teeth sunk deeper. He stopped struggling and fell back in whimpering defeat.

Borodin opened his eyes and stared. He was in the bottom of a basin in the very pit of the valley. Ancient trees, like cathedral spires swathed in ivy and vines, surrounded the clearing. Dozens of utahraptors filled the basin. Some were performing elaborate mating rituals; their feathers above their heads flexing like headdresses as they ducked and weaved and fanned their forearms at each other.

Other utahraptors mated and squealed while mother utahraptors

nuzzled their fuzzy chicks in large nests of packed mud and fern-fronds. Borodin was pinned down in one such nest.

Two male utahraptors held him down. A female utahraptor, with blazing crimson feathers, approached with a brood of fluffy chicken-sized infants. She nuzzled one of the males holding Borodin.

The male let out a throaty, rumbling growl. Borodin trembled. The chicks scrambled over his torso and pecked his chest with needle-like teeth. They hardly broke the skin. Borodin leaned his head away from a chick licking his lips.

Borodin stared at another nest where a female utahraptor was curled around her offspring. When the female utahraptor stood up, Borodin saw the body of a dead man sprawled in the nest beneath her. The corpse's hollowed stomach bulged with squirming feathers. Borodin stared, horrified, until a baby utahraptor poked its head out of the bloody mess.

Borodin shrieked and bucked beneath the little creatures climbing over him, but the male utahraptors stopped his struggles with a searing squeeze of their jaws.

The chicks found their way to Borodin's gaping stomach cavity. Borodin had a rudimentary knowledge of the human body; the abdominal muscles were extremely sensitive, but the organs held within didn't possess the same nerves for physical sensation. He wouldn't be able to feel what was about to happen, but he would have to watch. Borodin shut his eyes and wailed.

Soft footsteps traced his stomach. He couldn't bear to keep his eyes closed; when he opened them, he saw the chicks gnawing through his intestines, pulling strings of flesh from his abdomen.

Borodin screamed until his throat bled. The chicks squealed and burrowed deeper inside of him. Borodin could only stare and plead forgiveness as he was eaten alive from the inside-out. He prayed for the escape of death.

EPILOGUE – ONE YEAR LATER

"I think we're getting closer," Xavier said.

Xavier snapped his compass shut and folded the map. Andrei was crouched beside him. Nguyen and Syd, their new recruits, knelt behind them with their rifles drawn. An extra platoon of Green

Beret were crouched in a ring around them.

Each Green Beret held enough firepower to decimate any danger they faced. Luckily, they hadn't had to use them; their journey through the valley had been surprisingly peaceful.

In the months that had passed since the destruction of the collider, much had changed. Once the remaining survivors made it back to a base south of the DMZ, the remnants of Vulture Squad went their separate ways.

Leon was sent back to the United States with a scholarship, courtesy of Jericho's connections. Eli became the leader of the newest iteration of Vulture Squad and went back to saving Americans and Vietnamese prisoners from Viet Cong and NVA internment camps.

Xavier had become the leader of a new Special Forces squadron Jericho had created called 'Stalker Squadron'. Stalker Squadron was responsible for helping Andrei to track and eliminate the utahraptors of the valley.

After months of vicious withdrawal, soul searching, and fighting for his sanity, Andrei had regained his lost clarity. He was now a healthy young man, physically fit, and at peace with himself. He had been eager to escape the jungles of Vietnam, but he knew he could never leave the dinosaurs of the valley.

Andrei wanted to make sure that the dinosaurs would never breach the newly constructed perimeter of electric fences and concrete that rimmed the valley. Xavier, Stalker Squadron, and the Green Beret had kept him safe on his research expeditions. This granted him little peace, however, with his new discoveries. The valley was devoid of utahraptors. Without the utahraptors, the valley blossomed with herbivorous life. The tyrannosaurus family sustained themselves on a healthy diet of triceratops, and the kaprosuchus continued to prowl the waterways. All of the quetzalcoatlus they could find, however, had been shot out of the sky by helicopters.

Every measure was taken to prevent the further spread of the dinosaurs, but the utahraptors were different. They were too intelligent to be contained. Andrei knew this, and it filled him with a gnawing sense of dread.

"Just over this hill," Andrei said.

The troop of soldiers cautiously edged towards the basin. The jungle was alive with an otherworldly din of dinosaur vocalizations;

birds and monkeys sang amongst the choir of ancient beasts.

Sunlight poured through the tree tops and showered the jungle in golden splendor. Andrei licked his lips, grabbed his binoculars, and peered over the hill into the basin below. What he saw made his stomach plummet.

The basin was empty. All of the utahraptor nests were filled with broken eggshells and the bones of hapless humans and animals. Andrei had done research into the behaviors of utahraptors, but they were still elusive and mysterious creatures.

It was Andrei's theory that the utahraptors provided their chicks with innards because they were easier to chew. As the chicks grew, they would feast upon the flesh left clinging to the bones of their parents' prey.

Once the chicks were large enough to hunt, they did; Andrei had observed numerous infant utahraptors chasing insects, mice, and lizards through the brush. While Andrei used to delight in watching the infants play, the sudden lack of utahraptors made him go numb. "This is bad," Andrei whispered.

Xavier nodded. He brought a walkie talkie to his lips and said, "Group Bravo, this is Group Alpha. We have no signs of Uniform Romeos. Have you found anything?"

The walkie talkie rasped.

"Rodger, Group Alpha. We've found gaps in the fence. Florez found a body in a village to the north. Another body was discovered to the south. There's been a breach in the perimeter. Request immediate evac."

"Roger Bravo, we'll alert Ricardo ASAP," Xavier said. He went to shut off the radio when the static screamed back to life. Electronic shrieks filled the air. Xavier's eyes widened.

"Alpha, Alpha, we have utahraptors! I repeat, we have--"

The radio cut off. Xavier and Andrei stared at each other.

The jungle was silent.

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A quick note on the origin of Primitive War – Primitive War began as an interactive online story known as ‘Hunted’. Readers were able to submit characters in the story, and while they no longer share qualities with their former selves, some of these characters are still in Primitive War. These characters and their creators are listed as follows.

-Sergei (created by James Lancaster)

-Leon (created by Joel Ferris)

-Miller and Nguyen (created by Nicholas Hanson)

-Gerald and Ozzie (created by JPL user Raptor10)

-Logan and Shadow (created by JPL user scythefang)

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Much love and many blessings. Thanks for reading!

-Ethan Pettus